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ABSTRACT

This publication presents reports on four small-scale research projects conducted by educators that helped them explore ways of "doing literacy" and "doing literacy research." Focus of the projects was to learn more about how to do research by completing a work-based project related to literacy. "Teaching and Researching in Adult Literacy and Numeracy Programs: An Introduction" (Sue Shore) provides overviews of the four reports and an account of the research training available to researchers. "The Curriculum Practices of Adult Community Education Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Providers in South Australia" (Jan Peterson) describes how the author worked with community literacy educators in neighborhood houses to explore their curriculum practices and derive a clearer understanding of the characteristics of the "community curriculum." It argues that development of social capital is a major outcome of literacy programs in community contexts. "Women Experiencing Domestic Violence: An Investigation into Their Needs for Literacy Services" (Jane Gunn) reports on research into how domestic violence service providers recognize and support the literacy needs of women who experience domestic violence. "Feminist Approaches to the Women's Education Program in South Australian Technical and Further Education Institutes: Parallels with Adult Literacy Pedagogies" (Jo Martin) considers research into the feminist and literacy pedagogies of the Women's Education Program and how these pedagogical practices "fit" with literacy learning. "Women at Play: Finding Their Voices Through Writing for Performance" (Liz Campbell) explores the question of whether teaching women to write dramatic monologues can help them with literacy. It tests the theory that the creative writing and literacy skills of the women would gain in quality if they could be persuaded to draw upon their own life experiences as a basis for their creative, imaginative work. "Research and Practice: Unsettling a Troublesome Binary" (Sue Shore) provides a preliminary discussion about a research training and mentoring model of support developed in South Australia for

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adult literacy practitioner researchers. (Most chapters included substantial bibliographies.)(YLB)

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Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium

ALNARC

Doing Literacy, Doing Literacy Research:

Researching practice in adult literacy settings

Edited by
Sue Shore, Ruth Trenerry, Melanie Coombe
University of South Australia

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In addition, the employing bodies, which were responsible for teaching settings and managerial support as the practitioner researchers undertook their projects, have also provided significant in kind contributions to the projects. In 2000, Adelaide Institute of TAFE provided this support via the Women's Education Program in particular, as did the Adult Community Education Unit and private training organisation Protea Training.

The production of completed reports involves many stages and we acknowledge the sustained commitment of the practitioner researchers, their employers and critical friends, the anonymous peer reviewers who provided feedback on the projects, the adult learners involved in the programs, and the range of people who responded to drafts of early work as the researchers developed their ideas. Without their efforts, developing reports of the research process would not be possible.

Teaching and Researching in Adult Literacy and Numeracy Programs: An introduction

Sue Shore
University of South Australia

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) is funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) through the Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) to promote research and to stimulate thinking about adult literacy and numeracy policy, theory, and practice. An important aspect of this work involves mentoring and promoting the work of practitioner researchers working in local contexts, asking questions about practice, and building a body of published work that will stimulate critical debate about policy and practice. One aim of the consortium is to link this work with other agencies.

Between June 2000 and March 2001, ALNARC (SA) drew on the resources of a Spencer Foundation grant, ALNARC funding, University of South Australia support, and a range of local education providers to work with educators involved in small-scale research projects to help them explore ways of "doing literacy" and "doing literacy research". The focus of the projects was to learn more about how to do research by completing a work-based project related to literacy.

The projects sponsored during this period identify a number of tensions in literacy teaching, many of which are related to what Jan Peterson identifies (in this volume) as the "hard to measure" facets of education so significant in descriptions of practice invoked by literacy educators. Moreover, it was no accident that the projects featured women-positive and feminist perspectives on literacy provision. During the past three years, researchers and practitioners in South Australia have talked more publicly about the predominance of women as learners and workers in this field (see, for example, Shore & Trenerry 1999; Trenerry 1999; ALNARC 2000). Some practitioners and managers expressed interest in exploring this aspect of literacy provision in more detail. The four projects presented in this collection are the partial result of that process. Additional projects have been supported and published in other forums (see, for example, Campbell 2001; Lake et al. 2001; Reid 2001; Trenerry 2001; Wood 2001).

Jan Peterson worked with community literacy educators in neighbourhood houses to explore their curriculum practices and derive a clearer understanding of the characteristics of the "community curriculum". She argues that the development of "social capital" is a major outcome of literacy programs in community contexts.

Jane Gunn, Protea Training, moved the focus of literacy "provision" to a wider set of community agencies and explored relations between domestic violence and literacy needs. She recognises that women from all levels of society experience domestic violence and that there is not a direct correlation between low literacy levels and the experience of domestic violence. Her research investigates how service providers recognise and support the educational and literacy needs of women moving on from domestic violence.

Jo Martin worked with a group of educators and students in the Women's Education Program at TAFE SA to explore the relationship between feminist pedagogies and literacy pedagogies. The educator part of the group explored how their pedagogical practices are related to the feminist objectives of Women's Education and how these practices "fit" with literacy learning. A second level of Jo's inquiry investigated the learning experiences for students as a result of the feminist pedagogy of the program.

The penultimate paper in the collection reports on a module developed by Liz Campbell in conjunction with her teacher research project in which she worked with women literacy learners to exploit the use of imagination in literacy learning. Her project explores the question of whether teaching women to write dramatic monologues can help them with literacy. Liz wanted to test the theory that the creative writing and literacy skills of the women would gain in quality if they could be persuaded to draw upon their own life experiences as a basis for their creative, imaginative work.

These four projects point to interesting differences and similarities across "literacy contexts" of community programs, women's education and community services agencies, not least because each project explores the concept of preparatory work and articulated pathways as a means of access to and consolidation of learning opportunities. The projects draw on metaphors of flow between courses/modules and facilitation strategies that encourage learners to "keep moving" in their learning. Each of the projects suggests that, rather than locking learners into dependency or "wasting" money on excessive provision, these clearly articulated pathways and opportunities, at times with overlapping outcomes, enable learners to access levels of training and learning that were previously unimaginable to them.

Finally, I present an account of the "research training" available to the researchers in this and other projects conducted in previous years. This paper is a preliminary exploration of data collected from over 13 researchers who have undertaken projects and completed them to the point of final documentation. Anyone who has been involved in a process of imagining, operationalising and documenting a project, knows that it involves various skills, knowledge, and a certain amount of courage to explore questions that may have no clear or popular answers. The documentation of the ALNARC (SA) research mentoring process rounds out the reader's understanding of and engagement with the practitioner research investigations.

The practitioner researchers and research mentors involved in the program are well aware of the constraints, gaps and lack of neutral objectivity associated with the research methods adopted for the projects. The projects began, however, with the premise that literacy provision happens in many ways in order to address the complexity of learners' lives and provider resources. Students learn in these programs and, equally, educators learn from their engagement with learners in programs. Hence these projects, and my own version of the "research training" developed to support the practitioner researchers, point to the importance of stories about teaching and learning that will provide a counterbalance to the line of reasoning that "one size fits all". Those of us with a vested interest in adult literacy and numeracy provision need to use these accounts as a way to consolidate our existing knowledge about literacy and numeracy provision and, at the same time, to unsettle our notions of what "doing literacy" and "doing literacy research" can be.

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The Curriculum Practices of Adult Community Education Language, Literacy and Numeracy Providers in South Australia

Jan Peterson
ACE Unit, Department of Education, Training and Employment
and
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This paper reports on a research project undertaken by a group of practitioners from community-based literacy programs in South Australia. The research team interviewed community practitioners, about their practices and perspectives on provision in the face of recent rapid changes to the field, to collect qualitative data on their understandings of curriculum, adult literacy, and participants in community-based programs. A profile of current provision, including ten elements that form the basis of an implicit "community curriculum", emerged from the data. The most effective programs use diverse and flexible delivery modes and resources relevant to learners' experiences and daily needs. They also include learners in decision-making about their education. The paper argues that this approach encourages the development of learners' social capital — the building of social and community networks through trust and the sharing of experiences, balanced by links to information and processes beyond learners' immediate context. The development of social capital influences the retention and participation of learners in programs as well as their independence within their communities.

Introduction

More than 50 community-based organisations in South Australia receive funding from the Adult Community Education Council (ACEC) administered by the Adult Community Education (ACE) Unit of the Department of Education, Training and Employment, South Australia, to support the delivery of adult language, literacy and numeracy services to the community, through organisations that do not have education as their core business. These services are aimed at people who are outside the formal education system and whose needs are not being met by other service providers. Participants may have very low confidence and skills; they may be out of the workforce; they may also be experiencing social disadvantage through membership of a disadvantaged group.

As a condition of funding, community providers are required to use an appropriate curriculum framework to structure learning programs that will offer learning pathways for participants. The curriculum framework that has been made available to providers since 1995 is Certificate 1 in Preparatory Education (CPE). This certificate is a competency-based curriculum which incorporates modules aimed at developing skills for personal and work-related use, as well as

those skills that enhance participation in the wider community. Few community providers are registered to deliver the curriculum in an accredited manner; community providers prefer to maintain a position as providers of non-formal adult education. Many community providers express concern that a competency-based curriculum does not fit well with the non-formal, learner-centred, flexible, needs-based approach that they believe is a key characteristic of community provision.

> *The introduction of competency-based approaches has encouraged a great deal of debate in education among theorists as well as practitioners: Although the rigidity of the competency-based approach may benefit the white- and upper-class students, I doubt it will remedy the illiteracy problem that plagues the majority of subordinate groups ... Panaceas such as more student contact hours for reading and math ... will perpetuate those ideological elements that negate students' life experiences. As a result, students react by refusing to read what the curriculum has decided they should read.*
>
> (Freire & Macedo 1987: 123)

This project set out to discover more about the curriculum practices of community educators and to explore the way that these workers make decisions about their practice, in order to derive a clearer understanding of the characteristics of the "community curriculum". A principal aim was to examine the "hidden" curriculum of community-based adult English language, literacy and numeracy programs in South Australia with particular reference to the ways that community educators adapt existing curriculum frameworks to meet the individual needs of their clients. By "hidden", I refer to the kinds of approaches and practices used in community programs that are not explicitly described and certainly not formalised in the fashion of the competency-based CPE.

The research method was devised to draw on the experience of community educators. It encouraged the educators working in the field to reflect on their practice and articulate their beliefs about the work in which they are involved. As the group of practitioners stated, educators talk to students and learn about them because classes are small and informal.

Educators working in community-based language and literacy programs argue that they approach these programs from an holistic perspective that encompasses the skills of reading, writing, enumerating, using technology and functioning comfortably in society. Thus, it is about communication and power, social acceptance and independence.

They also argue that curriculum should be a flexible framework that starts with the needs of the participants and can change direction as required. They are critical of the use of the model of competency-based education for language, literacy and numeracy learners because participants in community programs come with widely varied backgrounds and previous learning experiences that require acknowledgement.

A secondary aim of this project was to promote among community practitioners the concept of the teacher as researcher and to contribute to the

professional development of community practitioners. The team of researchers recruited from the field to assist in the collection of data found the process of conducting the project to be an experience that has transformed their perspective of their work. As Josephine Lamshed, one of the research assistants, commented: "Being part of the research team has been fun and very educational. It certainly made me see my work ... as part of a bigger whole."

This paper situates the research in the historical and theoretical contexts that influence provision, particularly the recent rapid changes to community-based adult literacy provision due to the introduction of competency-based curriculum frameworks. The paper considers the multiple discourses that frame community provision and the ways in which educators understand curriculum. The paper goes on to describe a profile of the field — the nature of programs as well as the values and beliefs that underpin community practice. I identify the ten elements of community provision that emerged from the data, elements that constitute, the team would argue, the basis of "community curriculum". The paper then discusses the implications of this implicit curriculum in terms of providers, program support, and policy. The project team found that long-held views of community provision were both confirmed and challenged by the research. A range of areas that require further investigation is considered in the final part of the paper. The team believes that it is important to encourage practitioners to be involved in research into their sector.

Methodology

Community-based language and literacy providers that receive funding through the Adult Community Education (ACE) Council regularly report on their programs using quantitative measures, in keeping with accountability requirements. These measures include national data collection, the documentation associated with funding through ANTA, and formal enrolment details of students so their progress can be tracked. Providers frequently express concern that these kinds of data fail to provide a "real" picture of what happens in community education programs. This project was seen as an opportunity to collect the kinds of qualitative data that could provide a more complete picture of the way that the programs are planned and delivered.

As a project officer working within the ACE Unit, I was in a position to recruit a team of five research assistants from the field. Their task was to negotiate access to providers who expressed interest in participating in the project and to conduct interviews with community practitioners to gain a snapshot of current practice. The use of research assistants from the field was an attempt to place the project within the field as a professional development activity. One aim was to promote the idea of teacher as researcher; another was to reduce the effect, on the data, of the project being conducted by the organisation that provides the funds. It was believed that if the research was carried out by their colleagues, participating practitioners would feel more willing to be open about their experiences and perceptions — that practitioners' perspectives and agency were a valuable part of the research process.

In addition to interviews, the qualitative research methods included a focus group, which was attended by educators who are members of the Statewide community language, literacy and numeracy educators' network. The focus group produced data on the beliefs of educators regarding three of the key elements of this study: adult literacy, literacy students and curriculum. An ongoing literature search aimed to gather theoretical and contextual data to assist in analysis of the qualitative data from the focus group and interviews.

Practitioners participating in interviews and the focus group were recruited by means of a letter to each funded organisation that outlined the project and invited participation. Those practitioners who were interested in contributing to the project returned consent forms signed by themselves and management. A list of these volunteering participants was compiled and provided to the research assistants who, between them, arranged with whom they would make contact to organise the interviews. Some 22 practitioners were interviewed.

The interviewers were guided by an interview pro-forma to ensure some conformity in the types of questions, to assist those new to the interviewing process, and to facilitate analysis. The researchers were also encouraged to collect anecdotes about programs and to record their observations and impressions of the research process. These records became part of the research data. Some of the anecdotal records were in note form, taken down at the time of the interviews; others were reworked as narratives and included as the research progressed.

The research team met at regular intervals to share experiences and to reflect on the research process. These meetings proved to be an important feature for the group as novice researchers. The meetings enabled them to share their excitement about the work they were doing, to highlight some of the difficulties they were experiencing, and to find support through membership of a group with a shared purpose. This process also served to reduce some of the isolation experienced by workers in this field, which is an unfortunate characteristic of teaching in organisations that do not have education as their core business.

My role in the process had several dimensions. As head of the research team, I drew together the analysis of the data. As research mentor, I offered my research experience as a resource. I have also been responsible for representing the team's views on the research findings in this paper.

Theoretical and historical context

Language, literacy and numeracy programs are funded by the ACE Council's grants program to target adults in the community who are disadvantaged. These adults are disadvantaged by their English language or literacy and numeracy skills, which limit their ability to participate as full citizens in Australian society. They may also be disadvantaged by their membership of a cultural group that is outside of the "mainstream" of society; they may be out of the workforce; they may be economically disadvantaged or may have a disability. Adults who are experiencing multiple disadvantage are already alienated from "mainstream" society. The decisions made about the learning opportunities that they are able to access can serve either to alienate them further or include them.

Curriculum

Commonsense definitions frame "curriculum" in terms of the content of a course of study or training. We would argue, however, that curriculum also covers the range of experiences offered by an educational program: "Curriculum is all those discursive practices which affect what and how students learn, and what and how teachers teach" (Johnson & Reid 1999: ix). It includes that which might be taught and how it might be taught, but it also includes a set of values and the implicit communication of those values. Curriculum is also contextualised by a particular culture and time. Understanding curriculum in this way raises questions about who makes the choices — whether curriculum writers, teachers, tutors or learners — about what learners need and why (Johnson & Reid 1999: x). Those choices reflect the values of those who are in the privileged position of being able to choose.

> *The perceived needs of marginalised groups are generally arrived at from consultation with voices within educational organisations: students or teachers who have already been selected by the criteria of the dominant culture and are operating from a prescribed position of power within the system.*
>
> (Shore et al. 1993: 42)

We suggest that educational provision that specifically aims to address educational disadvantage needs to include clear processes that enable individuals and groups to be involved in the decisions made about their learning. This involvement is necessary to ensure that the diversity of learners' experiences is accounted for in understandings of curriculum and the shape of provision.

Multiple discourses of adult literacy

The ways that stakeholders talk about, fund, plan and deliver adult literacy services are imbued with the values and beliefs that are based on the stakeholders' historical, political and cultural perspectives — and these vary. To understand how and why they vary, it is necessary to understand something of their history.

Community-based adult literacy programs can trace their origins from the social justice activities of the early 1970s, such as the 1975 UNESCO symposium. These activities posited the view that "literacy is a fundamental human right" (Searle 1999: 10). Social justice activities focused on addressing the social disadvantage experienced by individuals and groups outside of the "mainstream" of Australian society. Intervention to enable adults to develop English language and literacy skills to a standard that was acceptable was viewed as an essential component of a "just" society.

Humanistic principles, based on belief in the potential of individuals to grow and develop, underpinned much of adult literacy provision in those early days, whether it was delivered at TAFE or in the community. These principles, for all their emphasis on addressing disadvantage, tended to promote a deficit model of target learner groups, however, because of the way "mainstream" society was homogenised and acceptable standards of literacy were dictated by

the needs of those *already* picked up by programs. Certain marginalised groups were apt to be overlooked, while those in programs were being encouraged to achieve an invisible marker of literacy aimed at "mainstream" assimilation.

Early in the 1990s, worldwide economic recession brought political change to Australia, which resulted in new economic rationalist policies broadly adopted by state and federal governments. These policies placed emphasis on the workforce's developing a standard of skill that would ensure Australian industry could compete effectively in world economic markets. Such policies carried through a market-driven approach to education by following the principle that competition between educational providers and a consistent approach to curriculum was a key to greater efficiency and effectiveness in the adult education sector. Adult literacy practitioners were constrained to conform to new models of provision because of their dependence on public money to make services available.

Curriculum frameworks referenced against a competency-based curriculum model were developed for adult education. The notion of competency-based curriculum incorporates a "top down" approach derived from a determination of the skills needed to achieve a practical purpose. Decisions about "who needs what" are based on a technical discourse that views education as an "assembly line producing human skills and capacities. Educational outcomes are stated in advance and individual performance is assessed in relation to these objectives" (Searle 1999: 11). The language of education in such a discourse moves from "education" to "training", from "learning" to "achieving outcomes", and from "student" to "client". Literacy workers may have retained their original values, but they have been constrained to translate their practices so that they would conform to the demands of the new adult education market (Searle 1999: 10–13; Sanguinetti 1999: 71–2). So two discourses of literacy have framed provision and understandings of learners' "needs" since the shift in policy in the 1990s.

Community-based literacy programs in South Australia were in a position to resist some of the change and maintain much of their original discourse of adult literacy because their funding base was different to most of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. Adult Community Education (ACE) funding, although aligned with the VET sector to enable pathways into work, has maintained a primary focus on addressing disadvantage within the adult education sector.

A draft policy paper, *The Strategic Framework for the Implementation of Community-based Language and Literacy Programs in South Australia, 1994 to 1997* (Department of Employment, Training and Further Education 1994), placed such programs at the beginning of a continuum of adult education and training leading to vocational outcomes. The framework introduced some fairly prescriptive funding policies that initially brought significant change to provision and new models of delivery.

The scope to make decisions about provision, which was lost during these changes to the field, has been slowly increased since that time, as evolutionary

changes in the framework have resulted in the return of more and more control to providers through funding reductions and feedback from the sector. Community practitioners currently have considerable freedom to develop learning programs for their communities using a range of delivery models that reflect the multiple discourses of literacy provision. The main constraint to control in the hands of providers is student numbers, due to accountability requirements. (Department of Education, Training and Employment 1997, Department of Education, Training and Employment 2000).

Mayo (1997: 21) suggests that market-led economic growth should not be the sole indicator of development:

> *On the contrary, development should be measured ... in terms of a society's success in meeting the basic needs of all its people, including their needs for education and for health, on the basis of environmentally sound, sustainable livelihoods ... It should be based upon active community participation and empowerment; bottom-up, "People Centred Development".*

The provision of a diverse range of educational opportunities is important to reflect the cultural diversity of adults in Australian society and how their perspectives, experiences, and ways of understanding vary: "[w]e know that to be effective, instructors and learning environments have to accommodate this remarkable diversity" (Preface in Wlodkowski 1999: 12). Moreover, providing a range of learning environments is crucial to educational equity — that is, providing adults with the options of formal and non-formal learning opportunities in their communities. The definition of "community" need not be limited to geographical location. It can also relate to community of interest, age, ethnicity or gender, for example. In order to become motivated to learn, adults "need to connect who they are with what they learn" (Preface in Wlodkowski 1999: 12). Provision of this range of educational opportunity demands that curriculum responds to the identified diversity.

This discourse of community development emphasises the need for a "grassroots" approach to developing programs that will be authentically "owned" by individual communities. Such methods necessarily mean that these programs will not be homogeneous but will reflect the idiosyncrasies of the communities involved. One example of change to community provision that demonstrates the way in which programs can adapt to community needs, is their response to the incorporation since 1994 of English language services in the community into the same funding framework as the adult literacy and numeracy services. The integration of funding was imposed and, initially, it brought together two different methodologies — one-to-one and the use of volunteers from adult literacy with the classroom methodology of English as a second language (ESL). This incorporation, while dictated by economic rationalist principles, has subsequently had the effect of blending ESL delivery models with volunteer program models. It has created the potential for a wider range of options for program design and delivery for providers.

This discourse that links effective learning programs with communities promotes the development of "social capital". Social capital involves shared values, and the development of trust and bonding through networks and commonality, which are balanced by "bridging ties" outside the group that link social capital to external information and knowledge. While "human capital" involves the skills and knowledge learned in formal and informal learning, social capital is "built through meaningful interactions between people" (Falk 2000).

So what kind of links between community-based adult literacy programs and communities are indicated currently? Despite their position in the VET sector, community-based adult literacy programs in South Australia report that, at present, few of their participants have work-related goals. Many of the learners are older people; they may be primary caregivers for children or they may have disabilities. These participants are among those groups that have been marginalised by economic rationalist policies focusing primarily on preparing citizens for the workforce. The educational goals of these clients are principally the development of skills for greater independence and more effective participation in their communities.

Another significant change to participation in community-based adult literacy programs has been the loss of that segment of the client group that had clear vocational goals (along with the funding for that group). The Commonwealth Employment Service has redirected these clients into vocationally orientated language and literacy services.

There are strong indicators that the development of healthy and responsive community-based language, literacy and numeracy programs corresponds with the principles of the discourse of community development:

> *Many communities experience stress due to high levels of unemployment and underemployment, breakdowns in some of the informal and formal social organisations, and dislocations within the community caused by poverty. It is necessary in such communities to plan for interventions that increase the individual's sense of belonging, competence, usefulness and power in order to build the strength of the community.*
>
> (Australian National Training Authority 2000, 5)

This discourse draws on elements of traditional humanistic discourse of adult literacy for social justice purposes and lifelong learning, but it has shifted the focus of community provision to take into account the diversity of learners' needs, as well as the diversity of communities that make up that which was previously homogenised as mainstream society, and a range of delivery models. It also emphasises the importance of learners' participation in decision-making about literacy provision so it best assists their independence and participation in their communities, and develops their social capital.

So, from a period of rapid change in the community sector, multiple discourses have emerged that frame community provision of adult literacy programs. The next section looks at how practitioners in these programs themselves describe provision and which values and beliefs they see as important.

How the field describes itself

Program profile

Interviews were conducted with practitioners who work in organisations that receive ACE Council funding to deliver language, literacy and numeracy services. The data obtained from the interviews have provided a snapshot of programs as described by the educators working in the programs. The following profile of programs emerged. (Percentages represent the proportion of programs to which each point relates.)

Entry arrangements

Participants are able to enter and exit the program at any time in 100% of programs examined. New participants are integrated into the existing class through a process of introductions, conversation and a flexible approach to the day's learning plan in 36% of programs canvassed: "New friends always welcome." When one-to-one learning is available, the program starts with the student, so integration is not an issue in 22% of programs.

Participants

Programs focus strongly on English as a second language (ESL) teaching in 95% of programs and, to a lesser extent, on adult literacy in 50% of programs. The most significant participation is by non–English speaking background (NESB) people. Ninety-five per cent of the programs canvassed have learners with English skills defined as "intermediate"; sixty-eight per cent of programs have NESB learners at a beginner level.

Sessions

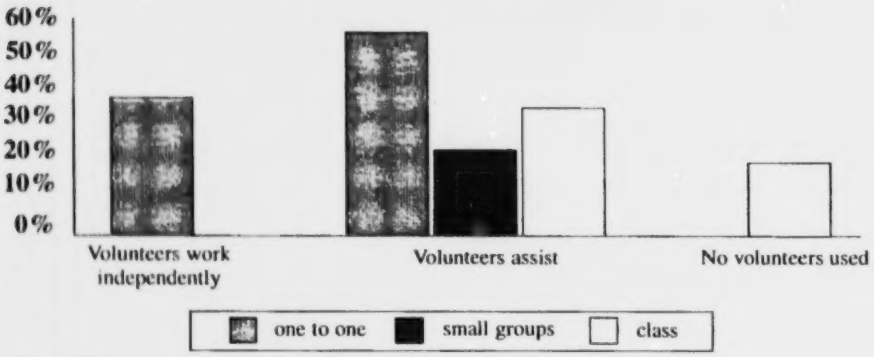
Most organisations offer two to three sessions a week to participants (in 72% of programs).

Delivery methods

Classes are the method of delivery in 68% of programs. This delivery method may involve whole group activities, small groups or one-to-one learning with volunteers, computer-based activities, or a combination of these.

Volunteers deliver educational services in 72% of the programs. Volunteers, when used, work one-to-one with students on learning programs planned by the educator in 54% of programs. Volunteers work independently on learning programs negotiated with students in 36% of programs. Thirty-one per cent of programs use volunteers to assist the educator in the class. Twenty-two per cent of programs use volunteers to run small group activities. Eighteen per cent of programs do not use volunteers because of a lack of availability of suitable volunteers, or because of the educator's preference to work unassisted.

Use of Volunteers



Environment

Rooms are usually arranged according to the furniture and equipment available at the site in 95% of programs canvassed. Student expectations are taken into account in these arrangements in 54% of programs.

Educators stated that the most essential items of equipment to run the programs are tables and chairs (in 86% of programs), a photocopier (in 63%), a blackboard or whiteboard (in 41%), a quiet room (in 45%), and tea or coffee facilities (in 31%).

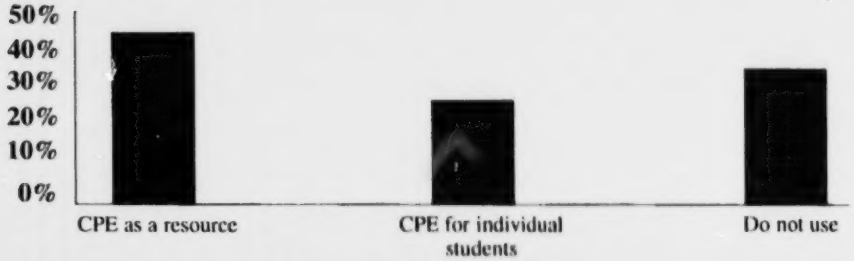
Resources

The resources used for the programs usually come from the educator's own collection in 90% of the programs canvassed. In 86% of programs, some individually prepared learning materials are used. In 81% of programs, whiteboards or blackboards are used. Similarly, 81% of programs use the organisation's own resource collection. Computers are used as resources in only 50% of the programs and, of these, some are used by the educator to create learning materials and are not available to students.

Curriculum

Forty-five per cent of programs use the CPE curriculum as a resource to get ideas. Twenty-seven per cent use modules for individual students. Of the CPE modules that were reported as applicable to programs, reading and writing modules figure 30% of the time. Thirty-six per cent of canvassed programs do not use the CPE curriculum at all.

Use of Curriculum



Assessment

Educators plan learning programs for participants by interviewing individual students in 36% of programs, by working out students' needs and interests in an informal manner in 36% of programs, and by developing an overall plan for the program in 31% of programs. Planning included important elements such as providing opportunities for discussion activities (in 27% of programs), ongoing evaluation (in 27%), and ensuring that the learning program contains speaking, listening, reading and writing (in 22% of programs).

Evaluation

The elements of programs that were rated by educators as most important were: a friendly informal atmosphere (36%), responding to the needs of the group (22%), meeting individual needs (22%), and relevance to students' lives (13%).

Values and beliefs that form the basis of practice

A focus group made up of members of the ACE language, literacy and numeracy educators network group framed some statements about their beliefs regarding key elements of their practice. The group's beliefs are based on discussions with students made possible because classes are small and informal. In general, the group members stated that they allowed themselves to be guided by students — learning from them and sometimes making mistakes about them. These values and beliefs underpin their practice.

Literacy

The focus group argued that literacy is about the whole person and encompasses the skills of reading, writing, enumerating, using technology and functioning comfortably in society. "While it is about communication, it is also about power, survival and independence, social acceptance and freedom from fear" (focus group transcript).

Curriculum

The focus group was very clear that, based on their collective experience, curriculum should be a flexible framework that starts with the holistic needs of the participants to guide the lessons, but with the ability to change direction quickly. It needs to be student-driven, with guidelines for content, but extended by the interests of the students.

Participants

The practitioners recognised that participants come with widely varied backgrounds and previous learning experiences. In general, community participants are people who have perceived a need to learn to function in society, which may include a need to develop their social networks, but they may be experiencing low self-esteem. The practitioners believe that participants have great courage to have turned up at all but that they need encouragement to

continue. The group described participants as intelligent, well-functioning people, who require recognition for the skills and intelligence they possess; in return, participants demonstrate their appreciation for being accepted, listened to, welcomed and encouraged.

The community language, literacy and numeracy curriculum

Discussions with community practitioners frequently revealed their reluctance to make use of curriculum frameworks such as the Certificate in Preparatory Education (CPE). They believe that it has limited use with participants in community-based programs because of the framework's emphasis on competency-based outcomes dictated by an external standard of literacy. They also felt that such a framework constrains educators to plan and deliver their educational programs in a particular way. Some believe that they do not use curriculum.

The research team conducting the interviews with educators collected anecdotal evidence to provide additional information about the programs. The data have been worked into narratives with excerpts used below. Analysis of these stories has suggested that there are some common elements that can contribute to a description of the "community curriculum". They also suggest that principles of practice frame the community curriculum rather than content.

Key elements of community-based language, literacy and numeracy programs

Ten key elements that appear to typify community practice emerged from the range of stories collected from practitioners. These elements, we suggest, form the basis of the submerged curriculum of community programs. The following section identifies those key elements and quotes some of the anecdotal evidence collected from interviews to illustrate each element. I have chosen to leave the speakers anonymous to protect their identities.

Daily needs

Programs typically use activities that assist in the development of everyday skills, including the cultural knowledge that learners need to select appropriate skills for a range of activities. For example, in a discussion of Australian culture, one educator set up a small table in the centre of the room with plates, knives, forks, etc. The discussion centred on the "polite" way to eat in the Australian culture as compared to their own cultural perceptions of polite eating according to their different ethnicities.

> *We all laughed a lot and enjoyed the exercise immensely. It was fascinating to me to see differences ... for each amongst my group of different nationalities. It was educational for both my students and myself. Aside from language I feel one of the most important things I have to share with my students is the culture that goes with English language ...*

> *[T]imes like these, when I feel we both really learned something, as well as had a good time, are particularly rewarding.*

This element illustrates that facility in literacy, language and numeracy involves specific cultural considerations that vary according to social context, which learners and educators must consider in developing learners' skills to ensure that interactions in a range of community settings are meaningful.

Learning should be fun

Humour and fun are important elements that contribute to positive learning outcomes. Providers aim to create enjoyable learning experiences for participants, to assist them to see learning as a positive experience that they would like to repeat. This approach is an essential component of learning programs for those participants who may have experienced difficult learning experiences in the past — as English language learners or as literacy learners.

Educators, volunteers and participants frequently find sources of humour in the quirks of the English language, the Australian accent, and the mistakes we all make when we are learning something new. Shared laughter at these things also helps alleviate participants' fears of making mistakes, because they are recognised as a part of everyone's learning and a part of life. This reflexive approach encourages students to feel on a more equal footing in programs rather than at the bottom of an hierarchy based on competence.

Putting learning into the "real world"

Programs use "real world" events and activities as a starting point for an integrated approach to learning language and literacy. Current events usually feature strongly in program content. Participants frequently come to sessions with their views of and questions about events that are occurring in the world at that time, and educators and tutors use their knowledge and interest in these topics as a starting point for learning activities. The direction the learning leads to from that point is often difficult to predict. For example, as the time for the Olympic Games in Sydney approached, one tutor had the idea that the use of time and measurement in Olympic events could be the starting point for a numeracy component in the lessons. What began with simple vocabulary and using a tape measure became more involved once the learners were actively engaged in taking measurements. The activity moved into further expanding their vocabulary in relation to measurement and spatial concepts. This direction brought about some discussion of sentence structure. The participants began a game of estimating each other's measurements as well as other items in the environment. It became quite competitive. "The idea of winning added to enjoyment with names and estimates and winners written on the board and further ideas for 'The Theme' being introduced by the students."

This example shows the importance of community programs adapting to make connections with the social contexts that learners see as important and of using material relevant to learners. It also demonstrates the effectiveness of programs in which learners participate in decision-making about curriculum by

creating opportunities for learners to introduce topics and to influence the direction that learning takes. This inclusive approach clearly has a positive effect on participation rates.

Making connections with others

Opportunities for the development of social networks are an integral part of programs: building relationships is a valued process. There are often parties when students depart the classes or at the end of each term, which provide opportunities for sharing food. Everyone brings food from his or her own culture, or sometimes they attempt to prepare a dish from another. These events, enjoyed by all, include comparing and contrasting different foods and different cultures. Such opportunities strengthen the social network within the group as well as enabling the practice of new skills as people swap recipes. These social occasions create a "real" environment for language practice.

Educators and tutors see the success of these occasions as confirmation of the importance of the work's relevance in terms of people's lives and the expansion of their personal, social and support networks. The confidence and skills developed in this way are frequently revealed in the ways that participants welcome newcomers to the group and make them feel "at home". The development of such skills is further confirmation that learners feel on more equal footing in programs with this kind of approach. There are frequently other surprising outcomes, as one educator reported:

> *Two students, both originally from China, meet for the first time when they enrol and discover they have the same occupation and home city in common. Both have been lonely, one as a new arrival and the other isolated at home with a baby and little contact with people of her own culture. A friendship between both families develops. One, on leaving the class, comments that she came mainly to get out of the house and hadn't expected to learn much but that she's learnt a great deal of language and Australian culture. The other interviews an educator about the church as a part of a task set in another class she attends and she and her husband are grateful when we are able to find someone to edit his university thesis. Meaning? Isolation and loneliness of individuals decreased, social relationships built, intercultural understanding increased, English language skills developed, connections between education at different levels, a young overseas bride gaining a greater sense of belonging in Australian society, a couple returning to China with a sense of goodwill from and towards Australians.*

This example shows the way in which community programs encourage the development of social capital — bonding through commonality balanced by bridging ties that link learners to information and knowledge external to their immediate experience but important in developing their independence in a range of community contexts.

Valuing ourselves and others

Individual participants often express interest in finding out more about a topic that is then taken up with enthusiasm by others in the group. This exchange often occurs as a result of "real world" events.

> *An elderly Buddhist participant expressed the desire to know the words of Christian Christmas carols being played publicly for so long (before Christmas)! Tutor incorporated it into lesson content, to everyone's delight.*
>
> *One student arrived in class infuriated. [The] lesson plan was then discarded as a result. The student had been so engrossed in reading her homework that she incurred a fine for not having validated her ticket on the train. She was unable to convey her feelings or actions clearly and could not attempt to convince the inspector of her accidental oversight, being essentially an honest person. [The] lesson became a session on how to explain, dispute, request fairness and generally discuss public transport issues.*

Like the example in the previous section, these instances emphasise how community programs facilitate the development of learners' understanding of broader social issues and processes from which they may have been previously marginalised as well as how to represent themselves as social players with greater independence and confidence. They also demonstrate how important it is for providers to respond to the diversity of learners' needs.

Stepping out confidently into the world

Providers consciously aim for the development of learners' confidence and self-esteem. Educators often report that the progress that is most valued in their programs is shown by indicators that participants have developed the confidence to start making choices in their lives and the self-esteem to relate to others, adult to adult.

> *[A] student commenced in the program two years ago and never spoke a word to anyone. She undertook the work she needed to do and then left without a word. That was two years ago. Today this student chats to the tutors and learns as soon as she walks in. Her confidence has skyrocketed! She now states when she is tired and wants a break, what she wants to work on, with a gradually increasing vocabulary. For me this is heartening and rewarding when one can see how far a student has come and they are taking control of their learning! How can one measure outcomes like self-esteem, independence and confidence!*

As this example demonstrates, the quantitative assessment of learners' progress — like contact hours and so on — excludes the emotional dimensions of learning and social interaction. The qualitative data show that, by focusing on development of trust and a sense of inclusion, learners in community-based programs are acquiring the social and emotional skills to participate confidently in the broader community and to take control of their learning process.

Learning from each other

Learning is reciprocal. Programs contribute to positive outcomes for communities by enhancing cross-cultural understanding. Volunteers and students benefit from interaction with one another and contribute to increased goodwill and understanding towards those in the community who are, through culture or religion, positioned as "different".

Shared stories help reduce alienation as recent migrants adjust to new lives in Australia. As one educator reported:

> *Racism does occur and discussion about it helps when the students realise their race is not the only one picked on. "Whingeing poms and pommie bast — " may not be used much now but were in the past. Comparisons and criticisms of our new country inflame Aussie born. It is surprising what comes up in discussions, real "eye openers". Such teaching is never boring, programs are never completely kept to — it's an interesting job!*

The reflexive use of the experiences and backgrounds of learners and educators in order to make learning relevant assists development of social capital. These exchanges demonstrate practically how both learners and educators are part of the same broad Australian community made up of diverse groups, which, despite their diversity, may face similar barriers and opportunities. Understanding and trust are enhanced but so are links to previously unknown networks and processes.

Transitions and new ways of living

Adults often join adult literacy programs when they are facing life changes, such as the loss of a partner, or when they need to revise their personal view of themselves because of an acquired disability. Involvement in these learning programs can be an opportunity for them to get the support they need to make successful transitions. In the words of one educator, literacy often becomes "a tool for healing emotional wounds". The ability to express themselves in a supportive, non-judgemental environment can provide learners with the opportunity to come to terms with new ways of living, through recounting stories from the past, or keeping a personal diary. The outcomes of this process can be a revised view of themselves as competent people as well as learners, readers and writers.

One educator was able to report such a view despite the difficulties that one student is facing:

> *This student epitomises the notion of never giving up. His determination is inspiring to other students. For me, watching this learner grow and his skills develop step by step is rewarding. It will take time but I know that every step he takes will lead to his goal.*
>
> *Being able to assist students in personal ways as well as facilitating their learning is, I think, an important part of what I do as an educator — this learning cannot be measured; yet it is so powerful!*

So, community-based programs play a part in learners' personal development and wellbeing because they are about the whole person. This approach departs from the deficit model of learners as solely disadvantaged or marginalised, since it emphasises the multifaceted nature of learners and their strengths, as well as their needs. It also allows for change in people's lives, and encourages learners to make their own decisions about what they need to make such transitions by ensuring that provision is also adaptive.

Readiness to learn

Providers recognise that some students can take a long time to make recognisable progress in their learning. It may be due to learning disabilities, motivation or readiness. A story provided by an educator provides an illustration of the need for educators and participants to find the right key to open the door to learning.

> *An [elderly] widow ... little education in own country, has been attending for years with little progress and limited understanding. She started emailing a ... student who is learning English in Thailand. Her letters were short and boring, mainly about the weather. Now the emails are most interesting (and fewer grammar and spelling mistakes), and they are much longer. She still types with one finger but corrects her mistakes. Her concentration and initiative [have] grown a lot. She is excited to receive and send. I find her progress exciting and stimulating. She is a more interesting person — computers are great! When working!*

The stories that educators tell about programs and participants illustrate the role that the learning activities play in providing experiences that will enhance adults' perspectives of themselves, and of their place among others. Participants also gain new skills, but without a development of the "whole person" these skills cannot be successfully integrated.

Possibilities and pathways

Community-based learning programs have provided a starting point for many adults to move on to further education and employment by assisting them to develop increased confidence. The following stories are typical of the many ways that programs provide pathways:

> *A male student ... commenced classes about a year or so ago ... is at an intermediate level of literacy and also works on numeracy. Likewise this student had little self-esteem due to being told for years at school that he was "stupid" and would not get anywhere! Such negativity crippled any desire to learn he had. As he also had a hearing impairment, he was placed into the "too hard basket". Over the past year this young man has progressed beyond even his own expectations! Literacy classes are his second chance at education and from there he has moved into leisure courses in horticulture, volunteer work with a MACC program and achieving his first aid certificate. Now his literacy is more vocationally oriented. All he needed was someone to believe in him and what he was capable of!*

One year, term four was low on numbers and so we looked at where the students had gone. About half (4–5) had grown confident enough to enrol in TAFE courses.

A student feared impending exam [at an educational institution] due to his spelling difficulties. Discussions of different avenues of approach relieved his fears. He was not seen in class again. However when finally contacted, the tutor learned that he had passed his exams with flying colours, therefore felt no need to return!

One volunteer tutor was able to "OK" her work experience in the program in working with students with disabilities as a reference for employment she was seeking. I was contacted as a referee and she received two job offers after not being employed for a number of years. She is now very happily employed.

While many of the practitioners interviewed do not use the CPE framework for anything other than ideas, this example shows that the more holistic and qualitative approach of the community programs in which they work is not detrimental to creating vocational pathways. Rather, community provision seeks to adapt to learners' needs. The kind of curriculum that such community educators employ, although not necessarily formalised or explicitly described like the CPE, nevertheless continues to provide opportunities for people who may otherwise be excluded by, not catered for in, or dissatisfied with, formalised curriculum frameworks. The sector's liberal use of the CPE to diversify rather than codify delivery may in fact be an advantage to such learners.

What are the implications of the community curriculum indicated by this project?

Snapshot of community provision

The snapshot of community provision derived from the data confirms some of our ideas about the role of community-based language, literacy and numeracy provision in the overall picture of adult education and training. These ideas are, that programs:

- are non-formal learning programs that are able to be flexible to meet learners' needs;
- provide entry and exit to participants at any time;
- provide a "first step" on a learning pathway that may lead to further education, training and employment;
- assist participants to develop confidence and self-esteem.

The snapshot also *challenges* us to revise some of our previous conceptions that programs universally do the following:

- provide mainly adult literacy services;
- use volunteer staff in all programs to deliver the educational services;

- use a formal curriculum framework;
- have formalised processes for assessing the entry-level skills of participants;
- focus primarily on the development of individuals' basic language, literacy and numeracy skills.

English language and literacy

From the data collected, we have found English language to be the main focus for the learning programs, with literacy secondary. This focus is due to the high demand for services from adults who have migrated to Australia from non–English speaking countries and who wish to further develop their English skills after completing their "Settlement English" classes. Many others are those who missed out on classes when they first arrived in Australia years ago and have come to a point in their lives when they have the time or need to take part in learning programs. While the focus has shifted to ESL, the integration of English language and literacy provision has diversified design and delivery of programs.

Educators and volunteers

Volunteers are used in most of the programs, but by no means all. Some are responsible for negotiating and planning individual learning programs for participants, but more often they are involved in providing support for programs by assisting the educator to deliver the learning program, either one-to-one or in a group setting. Not all volunteers available in a community have the skills or inclination to take the responsibility for developing a learning program for adults. Some educators make the choice not to use volunteers in the programs because of a lack of volunteers with the necessary personal qualities or skills to work effectively with participants. They recognise that volunteers, whose attitudes and interpersonal skills do not match the principles of the program and the needs of participants, can do more harm than good. Educators also point out that the time needed to support volunteers adequately is beyond the means of programs to provide paid time for educators to perform this task. Therefore they work many volunteer hours themselves to ensure programs of a high quality. These issues have implications for educators as workers.

Curriculum as a resource

Programs do not use the formal curriculum framework consistently: practitioners prefer to use the CPE as one of a range of resources available to the program. The learning programs are not structured for the development of skills in a logical, linear manner, but move in directions (or even loops) dictated by the expressed needs and interests of the participants. This flexibility is essential to the development of the ability of participants to make choices about their learning. It is also essential to the provision of the "right" learning experience at the "right" time to match the readiness of participants to learn.

Assessment

Not all providers offer an initial interview for assessment. Instead, they prefer to allow participants to become comfortable within a group before decisions are made about their level of skills based on what they can do in that setting. English language and literacy provide the content and context for the programs, but providers measure success more in terms of personal and group outcomes than an increase in measurable skills or competencies.

Principles of learning

Despite the multiple discourses that potentially influence community provision, many of these indicators suggest that the development of social capital rather than human capital is the underlying principle in the "hidden" curriculum of community-based language, literacy and numeracy programs in South Australia. Social capital facilitates the learning and use of skills and knowledge built in interactive relationships. "Social capital therefore promotes active and sustainable learning" (Falk 2000). The attention paid to the processes of learning rather than the outcomes, and to finding links outside the individual's immediate context, promotes positive attitudes to learning and assists adults to learn the things that are meaningful for their own lives.

The notion of learner-centredness in these programs, traditionally part of the social justice agenda of community provision, is demonstrated in the negotiated flexible process and content of sessions. It is moderated, however, by the needs and the life of each group and its members, and by an overall aim of developing confidence as well as competence.

Implications

The findings of this project have a number of implications for stakeholders. They suggest some future directions for further research and consultation, policy development and management of the programs.

Providers

It is important that providers recognise that the values represented in their education program can be a barrier to participation if they are unconscious and unexamined. While organisations work with the best interests of their communities at heart, their practices may unwittingly inhibit participation when they represent values and priorities that are at odds with those of their target group.

Staff selection processes should recognise the multiskilled nature of the work of providing a community-based language, literacy and numeracy program. The important skills include the ability to be flexible, to use a range of methods, to do promotions, to provide counselling, to manage volunteers, and to be aware of referral networks. We now understand more clearly that programs are about the learner as a whole person, not just teaching English, reading, writing or numeracy.

Program support

There is a need to provide practitioners with up-to-date information about referral networks to assist them in helping participants to make connections with organisations that will be of benefit to them. Enhanced and expanded networks for practitioners can assist them to keep up to date with opportunities for learners.

Professional development activities should explicitly assist practitioners to strengthen their networks of support. They should also provide practitioners with opportunities to explore their practices and the principles on which they are based.

Policy

Indicators for the reporting of qualitative outcomes in learning programs need to be developed. Providers are keen to have opportunities for reporting beyond the current quantitative data that are required of them, so that there can be better understanding of these programs. It is also important to recognise and report on the social learning outcomes of programs as well as the individual learning outcomes. The concept of social capital may prove a useful tool for a shared understanding of the importance of this aspect of adult community education.

There is also a need for the development of principles and guidelines for adult community education programs. The Adult Community Education (ACE) Council is currently making decisions about the grants program as a result of a recent review. The results of this research project can potentially contribute to any development of new guidelines for programs.

Further research

Further exploration of the concept of social capital and its relationship to adult community education is warranted by the findings of this project. The project has illustrated the potential value of the social capital concept as a tool for allowing a shared understanding of some of the facets of education that are harder to measure quantitatively.

It would also be useful to consult with adult community education providers to find out if the findings from the language, literacy and numeracy programs have corresponding applications in their general education programs. The result may be a set of general principles that underpin the provision of education for adults disadvantaged by the current competency focus.

A more detailed examination is needed of the processes at work in community-based language, literacy and numeracy programs and how the decisions are made about content. A limitation of this research has been that it has involved the perspective of the program educators based on self-reporting. A deeper examination of practice could look at how the principles match up with classroom practice.

The teacher as researcher

The strategies adopted for this research project have shown that the concept of the teacher as researcher can be successfully promoted by offering opportunities for varying levels of support for practitioners. Teachers may not wish to be responsible for a single project but may welcome involvement as part of a research team that explores a topic of mutual interest. The practitioner researchers involved with this project have expressed interest in being involved with further research projects.

Conclusion

The research project has contributed to a new perspective on "community curriculum" and the process of determining and meeting learner needs. Its use of qualitative methods has provided the funding organisation with new tools for understanding and talking about practices in adult community education.

This paper has provided a view of the snapshot of provision that the project afforded. The historical and theoretical contexts of provision were explored to highlight the multiple discourses that frame educators' practice and their perspectives on curriculum in the face of recent rapid change. The data from our interviews with practitioners have been worked up into a profile of programs including entry arrangements, participants, sessions, delivery methods, environment and resources as well as how they use the formalised CPE curriculum and their assessment and evaluation processes. I have also described how the interviews and focus group provide an understanding of practitioners' values and beliefs in respect of literacy — values and beliefs that underpin their practice. The paper then identified ten key elements of community-based language, literacy and numeracy programs, which, we would argue, establish the basis of a "community curriculum". Important to this curriculum is its capacity to adapt to changing contexts and learner needs and to create links to the diverse communities in which learners must, or wish to, operate. As the final section of the paper has argued, the research findings have challenged some of the team's assumptions about community-based provision.

The process of researching the community language, literacy and numeracy curriculum has provided an opportunity for educators to reflect on and talk about their practice with other educators in a supportive environment. Those who were directly involved in the project found that it added to their understanding of their role in the "bigger picture" of adult community education. The project was also an opportunity to promote the concept of the teacher as a researcher, enquiring into her own and others' practice in order to contribute to a clearer understanding of this field of education.

The research provided a new understanding of the potential for gaps between current competency-based curriculum frameworks and the processes that are involved in delivering language and literacy services in adult community education programs. This knowledge has the potential for far-reaching effects on funding policy and program design because it proposes a model of adult community education distinct from the type of adult education

provision that conforms to the vocational education and training model. The knowledge gained also suggests some directions for future enquiries into adult community education and its role in the development of the social fabric of Australia.

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Women Experiencing Domestic Violence: An investigation into their needs for literacy services

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This paper reports on research into how domestic violence service providers recognise and support the literacy needs of women who experience domestic violence. The paper examines the critical shift away from the framing of both literacy needs and domestic violence as individual problems, towards an understanding of these issues as social problems. Domestic violence service provision focuses on the safety of clients, and literacy is prioritised when it affects clients' ability to deal with the "practicalities" of changing their circumstances. The research indicates that, where there are pre-existent links between the two sectors, awareness of the literacy needs of women who experience domestic violence underpins the strategies that service providers use with their clients. Clients are encouraged to consider their long-term goals, including education, but domestic violence service providers are hampered by time limitations, workloads, and a lack of information about literacy program options and referral. The research also suggests that literacy/ESL providers need a greater understanding of the way in which domestic violence affects learning. A number of recommendations for strengthening the links between the sectors are proposed at the end of the paper.

Introduction

The broad interest of this study relates to how the educational and training needs — with particular attention to the literacy needs — of women who have experienced violence at home are perceived and met by service providers at the first point of contact.[1] The agencies involved in this study were Community health and counselling services in the western suburbs of Adelaide.

The main research question was framed as follows: How do service providers recognise and support the educational and literacy needs of women moving on from domestic violence?

It needs to be stated at the outset of this paper that the researcher acknowledges that women from all levels of society experience domestic violence and that there is not a direct correlation between low

literacy levels and the experience of domestic violence. Horsman (2000, 323) states, however, that violence is widespread, "in particular [for] women who are racialized, poor, under-educated, disabled or experience any other additional marginalization."

I was motivated to conduct this research by my experience with a group of women in an English as a second language (ESL) class that I taught some years ago. The class was made up of all women. The composition of the class was not by design and was unusual for the program.[2] Amongst the women, there were five who had in common recent or past experiences of domestic violence.

The five women came from different language backgrounds, were very different in age, from early twenties to early seventies, and had very different lengths of residency in Australia, from recently arrived to long-term resident of approximately 20 years. They had very different educational backgrounds in their countries of origin — from post-secondary studies to minimal primary education. Of these five, two of the women had been recently sponsored to marry, one to a partner from her country of origin with whom she had migrated here to Australia, and one who had met and married an Australian national in her country of origin.

None of the women was employed at the time of the classes, although some had previously been employed in their country of origin, including management and professional positions. Some of the women had been referred to the program by the Jobs Education and Training (JET) Program, a program designed for women and funded through the federal government's initiatives.

Two of them had recently left violent partners and were in the process of "designing [their] social futures" (New London Group 1995: 18), with much heartache. The youngest woman was still living with her partner when she started the course, but left the marriage and went interstate during the course. The oldest had long ago been in a violent relationship and was now a widow.

Each woman was making a difficult journey. Their decision to "learn more English" was critical in moving towards a life in which they had greater power over their physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, and that of their children.

These women, along with others in the class, were supported in their learning by resources that gave them information about agencies and strategies available to assist them. They were allowed time within the class to speak on issues that enabled them to change their lives and become empowered. The methodology I employed incorporated ESL techniques into a Women's Education framework.

Their courage and their struggle, and the kindness and support they showed each other during those months together, remain with me as a source of inspiration. This paper is dedicated to them and carries with it a hope that other women may find both the internal strength and external (funded) resources to change and become powerful in their lives.

The paper reports on research into the links between the domestic violence service provision sector and the literacy/ESL sector, which was prompted by my experiences with this group of women. The paper describes some of the views

and practices of service providers when they attend to the needs of women with limited literacy that seek assistance with domestic violence issues. The first part of the paper considers some of the critical issues that surround understandings of domestic violence and literacy, as well as the questions that informed my inquiry. I then describe the design of the research project — the data collection, the participants, and the kinds of location on which I focused. Since I had some understanding of the degree of awareness among literacy/ESL practitioners of issues associated with domestic violence from my background in the field, I wanted to gauge the awareness of domestic violence service providers of literacy issues that their clients face. I then discuss the four key findings to emerge from the data, which relate to the prioritisation of literacy as a client need in domestic violence service provision, the strategies that service providers use to support women with limited literacy, the kind of links that exist between the sectors and the professional development indicated as necessary. The conclusion contains a list of recommendations for future action suggested by the research.

Critical issues

The Partnerships Against Domestic Violence (PADV) Project supports the notion that domestic violence be understood and acknowledged as gendered violence, citing Stubbs[3]:

> *The recognition of violence as gendered, however, need not preclude an examination of the specific contexts in which the violence occurs, nor of the manner in which race, class or sexual identity (or indeed other social categories) might intersect with gender.*
> (Strategic Partners Pty Ltd & Research Centre for Gender Studies 1999b: 1)

The main "social category" that has been used in this study is limited literacy in English, which intersects with gender. The connection between these social categories that is being drawn throughout this study is the role and importance of developing literacy skills for women making decisions or seeking ways to "move on" from domestic violence.[4]

Lankshear (1998) argues that literacy education is part of a wider ideal, which balances personal, group and collective goals. It would seek to promote "a fair balance of legitimate satisfactions across social groupings" (1998, n.p.). He suggests that literacy can only be meaningfully understood in the context of social practices and purposes. Accordingly, he argues, the educational imperative associated with teaching people to be literate is to assist them to participate in wider practices and goals rather than simply improving their ability to deal with texts (1998, n.p.). An overarching goal of literacy education according to Lankshear is "...the achievement of a universally literate populace who employ literacies effectively in pursuing their various individual and shared social, cultural, and economic purposes, in the interests/for the benefits of all on an equitable basis." (1998, n.p.)

The participation in and realisation of something larger than the lives they have been restricted to by their violent partners, also seem to be the unstated goals of many women who are reassessing their options when leaving domestic

violence situations. Among their options, they identify "learning more English" or "learning to read" as crucial to improving their life chances. Whether "learning more English" in a general way achieves that outcome most effectively is a question around which further research is warranted.

Until recently, domestic violence was treated as an individual problem and was regarded as a matter to be kept in the private sphere. Limited literacy has also been considered a private and individual problem and has some of the same ideology surrounding it as domestic violence, in terms of issues of shame and secrecy. The excuse of "I walked into a door" to disguise a violent partner's attack and "I've left my glasses at home" to disguise limited literacy, seem to me to be parallel — they both situate the problems with the individual.

There have been shifts in thinking, however, around this construction of domestic violence. For instance, significant funding has been allocated through the Federal Office for the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, for the PADV Project, an acknowledgement of the broad social and political consequences of domestic violence and the role that governments can play in combating the problem.

Lather describes the historical move in the late 60s and 70s of redefining those problems that were once thought to be individual problems as social problems that require political solutions as a result of the women's movement. She cites Fay in saying that:

> *Coming to a radical new self conception is hardly ever a process that occurs simply by reading some theoretical work; it requires an environment of trust, openness and support in which one's own perceptions and feelings can be made properly conscious to oneself, in which one can think through one's experiences in terms of a radically new vocabulary which expresses a fundamentally different conceptualisation of the world ... and in which one can gain the emotional strength to accept and act on one's new insights.*
>
> (Lather 1991: 60)

While Lather is speaking about grassroots feminist movements, it is important to note that the work that feminists have carried out over 30 years in addressing domestic violence has recently been acknowledged at government level in Australia through the funding of projects like the PADV Project. Much of the collected wisdom of feminists has been applied to such national projects which seek to transform the issue of domestic violence from a private and shame-laden issue to one which must be recognised and addressed publicly.

Women in domestic relationships characterised by violence, who identify that they need to leave or change the relationship, are often assisted by counsellors in community health centres. In the process of identifying the changes that they wish to make, some women also confront their need to improve their literacy skills. Their reasons include managing interactions with agencies more effectively, and improving employment opportunities.

The linkage of confidence in literate practices as part of a radical new self-conception for women who have experienced violence at home, is an aspect of

domestic violence research that I suggest needs to be explored further. The experiences of victims of domestic violence are well documented in many reports,[5] but, apart from the work of Horsman and her associates, there is limited material available specifically related to the literacy needs of these women and the Australian context. A search conducted in cooperation with the Australian Domestic Violence Clearinghouse found very little on the topic.[6]

Where education is mentioned in reports on domestic violence, it is in the context of community education about preventing domestic violence and of targeting groups such as perpetrators, adolescents or Indigenous Australians. Occasional references are made to the compounding of problems for victims by issues like speaking a language other than English and their inability to access services due to language constraints, or the need for culturally appropriate services (see, for example, Bagshaw et al. 2000: 91–105).

In this study, the goals of literacy learning have been reframed to acknowledge literacy as "social practice" — one in which we all participate. This approach draws on the work of the New London Group, a collective of academics and researchers who describe literacy learning as "... creating access to the evolving language of work, power and community, and fostering the critical engagement necessary for [women] to design their social futures and achieve success" (New London Group 1995: 1).

The New London Group goes on to describe its second goal as achieving "success through fulfilling employment" (1995: 1). I believe that it is necessary to view success more broadly. Success in "moving on" from domestic violence is precisely related to redesigning safe futures that will provide new levels of empowerment and self-esteem for the kinds of women discussed in this study. It is important, too, I suggest, to focus on the specific needs of particular groups and how those needs influence their education options and choices. The New London Group, for example, does not specify women but uses the generic term, "students'. The term downplays the gendered nature of issues like domestic violence and its interconnection with the literacy learning of some women.

Despite these qualifications, I have used their conceptualisation of the links between literacy as social practice, power and the communities that contextualise learning, to consider a range of issues about how service providers recognise and support the educational and literacy needs of women "moving on" from domestic violence. Research into literacy conducted by Gee (n.d.), Freebody and Luke (1999), and Lankshear (1998) has also guided the critical thinking on literacy in this paper. In addition, the work of Susan Heald and Jenny Horsman (n.d.) with women who have experienced domestic violence, and their literacy needs, has informed my thinking about how domestic service providers think about literacy as a client need. Susan Heald and Jenny Horsman (n.d.) refer constantly throughout their work to the need that women have for safety, and the impact that a lack of safety, or a sense that safety may be tenuous, can have on their ability to learn effectively. This approach is supported by the work of feminists like Lather, who, as I have already mentioned, also refers to the need for an environment of trust and support for women in the process of changing their self-conception (1991: 60).

Questions that have framed my inquiry include:

- How do service providers recognise and support women with limited literacy?
- What priority are service providers able to give to the issue of the literacy skills of their clients?
- What is the nature of contact between service providers and ESL/literacy providers?
- To what kinds of educational programs do service providers refer women?

Research design

The study was small and intended to gain a snapshot of the views and practices of people engaged in providing counselling and health services to victims of domestic violence, and how these service providers cater to the literacy needs of these women.

Primary source data were collected in interviews with service providers from four agencies in metropolitan Adelaide.[7] The interviews were conducted over a period of three weeks at each participant's worksite and were recorded on audiotape. I also made summary notes.

The research orientation was qualitative. Interviews were dialogic and interactive, based on a series of questions that I developed prior to the interviews but which were modified — expanded and adapted — in response to the direction taken by each research participant. While my field of expertise is English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), questions developed for data collection did not specifically ask participants to distinguish between English speaking background (ESB) and non–English speaking background (NESB) clients. The points raised in the interviews complement aspects of the work of Jenny Horsman whose research participants in Too Scared to Learn (2000) were educators and women who have experienced violence at home.

Prior to conducting my formal interviews, I met with the Domestic Violence Network. This group consists of service providers from a broad range of organisations that assist domestic violence victims, including the police, Centrelink, health services and youth services. No educational institution, however, is represented on this group.

The organisations that I selected in order to carry out the formal interviews are member groups of this network of service agencies. They included health centres and members of a government-funded project investigating domestic violence.

All the people that I approached agreed to participate. Participation was on the understanding that participants' names and workplaces would remain confidential.

In addition to the more formal interviews, the project officer from the government-funded project spoke with me in an informal, unrecorded interview, and provided me with some materials that agencies distribute to both victims and perpetrators. I also held a number of less formal meetings in the course of this project and used the information and suggestions to build the research.

Findings and issues

I was able to identify four key findings in the data:

- recognising and supporting women with limited literacy skills;
- making literacy a priority;
- institutional connections between service providers and ESL/literacy providers;
- professional development for staff.

The following discussion of these main findings draws on the range of material from formal and informal interviews but, in relation to certain issues, I focus on particular interviews because these participants have grasped the importance of the connection between service provision and literacy provision and, therefore, provide useful insights. The participants who made these connections are employed by agencies that support a feminist approach to service delivery; in the words of one agency's strategic plan, this means "challenging inequalities in power and status for women, ensuring that services for women are designed by and for women and supporting women's participation in decision making" (Department of Human Services n.d.).

Different ways in which service providers recognise and support women with limited literacy

Throughout this project, the dominant themes that research participants have raised have been the importance for women who have experienced violence at home to be safe and to develop their sense of worth. Without these qualities, they are unlikely to be able to access the resources that exist to change their circumstances and meet goals. These resources range from immediate needs, like emergency and health services, women's shelters and accommodation, to long-term needs for education and training to enable them to support themselves and their children. Resources exist to help specific groups, like migrant women, Aboriginal women and elderly women. They also include housing services, removalists, legal assistance, financial assistance, community houses and counselling services. An extensive list of the resources for women appears in the publication, Draw the Line, which is produced by the Western Domestic and Family Violence Action Group (2000).

Questions related to literacy needs of women in domestic violence situations were often described by interview participants as secondary to the immediate needs of their clients. While this lower priority can be demonstrated, women are also encouraged by service providers to make long-term plans to establish their independence. Participants from different centres commented that they perceive that classes for women who need literacy skills, if held at their centres, would probably be very successful.

One research participant spoke with passion of women's need to feel they have some control over their lives. She spoke of the women as "experts of their own lives", meaning that they know how serious the danger is in their lives, and they know the extent of what the perpetrator may do to them. She spoke of her

role being to empower the women through knowledge and support and to provide access to concrete resources, such as safe accommodation, as well as to information on which they can base their choices. She talked of their needing the "skills to ask" since they are disempowered, often blame themselves, and feel that they have "no right to ask".

Her method of working with women is a "narrative" way of working with the clients to identify the dominant stories in their lives. She stated that women often see themselves as "deserving" of domestic violence and as being "unable to do any better". She works with them to move towards seeing that they can have a different life and their circumstances can change. One of her underlying aims is to work with clients so they can come to a position where they recognise that they do not deserve domestic violence, and that the problem is with the perpetrator and a culture that supports violence. In this way, she is supporting women to redesign their social future by accessing the language and thinking of power.

In this process, she may refer them to a range of other agencies that provide services with an educational component. She listed a wide range of programs that her clients access, including groups about parenting, use of drugs and alcohol, socialising skills, relaxation and stress management. The scope of this project has not allowed an examination of the kinds of literacy skills that may be incorporated in an indirect way in these programs.

When she directly spoke about it, this community health worker identified the literacy needs of women who experience violence at home as not being a high priority, but, at the same time, she described a range of strategies that she uses to support and guide her clients in the short term during both one-to-one counselling and in groups.

She approaches the issue of literacy by asking, "Do you have trouble reading, because some people have trouble reading." She argued that this approach:

> *makes it as though it is quite normal, that some people have trouble reading and writing ... it's not like, "Can you read and write?", because that would get them defensive. "If you do [have trouble reading and writing] let me know, because then I can go through the book with you", or I'll ask, "Have you got someone who can help you to read it?"*
>
> (interview transcript)

She explained that when she provides a client with material like the resource booklet, Draw the Line (Western Domestic and Family Violence Action Group 2000), she always uses this script to allow the client a way of accessing reading assistance. In addition, she mentioned using a lot of visual material and showed me a range of materials that she uses, which are heavily supported by pictures. She stated that some of the materials she uses specifically with Indigenous clients.

So there is an element of ambivalence in how this participant positions the literacy needs of women seeking domestic violence service provision. There is an interesting juxtaposition of women simultaneously as "expert of their own

lives" and as disempowered individuals, because of the nature of patriarchy and the way that the dominant culture supports patriarchy. She expresses their literacy needs as being of lower priority, while using various effective strategies to identify literacy problems that may be experienced by such women. In addition, she caters for women with limited literacy skills by using visually oriented material, a narrative style, and a flexible approach to encourage clients to access assistance with reading, for example.

This research participant also identified a general awareness of literacy needs of clients by providers. She said that the workers at her centre consistently talk about issues relating to the literacy levels of their clients, and are conscious of the low levels of literacy of many of the people in the catchment area of the health centre.

Another participant talked about the issue of women needing assistance with "practicalities" that involve literacy. These "practicalities" include Centrelink forms and material about restraining orders, custody and access visits. She talked about how the health centre is unable to provide literacy help due to time constraints, but it does refer clients on, for example, to a community house where the clients can receive assistance in completing paperwork. A spin-off from clients' receiving this assistance is that some clients join an existing class that is available at that venue.

To summarise from the data, then, the different ways in which service providers recognise and support women clients with limited literacy are as follows:

- Providers in agencies that enunciate feminist values understand the need to support women with limited literacy.
- Those that understand this need provide materials that accommodate some of the clients' limitations in literacy.
- They are open with clients about the fact that having problems with reading is a common experience.
- They refer clients to community houses for assistance with practicalities.
- They give strong support to the idea of having literacy programs based at the health centres as venues that the women already attend, and with which they feel familiar and safe.

Giving priority to literacy: dilemmas and tensions

Competence in literacy is seen by some workers as having an integral role in developing practical immediate and long-term plans for survival and self-empowerment. The immediacy of other needs in respect of safety, however, reduces the priority that service providers are able to give women's literacy needs.

One participant talked about the long-term issues for women who choose to leave a domestic violence situation:

> *Where to from here? We talk around possibilities of education and retraining and often there's huge blocks there for them — not feeling confident, past experiences; education is one where failure has played a dominant story, so it's finding ways of entering into education that's safe*

> *and comfortable for them. And then for women to go from a domestic violence situation, say, into a TAFE is an enormous step. I know here at [her centre] we brought TAFE into [her centre] as a way of creating a safe place for women to get that connection. I think that's a really important thing to acknowledge for women from domestic violence situations who want to access education. They want to but also there [are] all sorts of barriers there that stop them.*
>
> (interview transcript)

This participant went on to talk in more detail about the safety issues for women. She talked about the role that community houses can play in building confidence for women, and suggested that these venues are perceived as safer and more accessible because they are often familiar to the women, are smaller, and have fewer systems to negotiate. She returned subsequently to the issue of women not seeing themselves as "having the skills to find their way around the system, let alone manage the study" (interview transcript), in a big organisation such as TAFE.

Service providers on the one hand talk about literacy as being secondary to safety and other immediate needs, but, on the other hand, they have a range of strategies in place that acknowledges the importance of women being able to access complex information, which is often in written form. While the service providers are committed to the meeting of immediate needs of the women, they also recognise that long-term issues of developing confidence and skills for living are crucial to their clients' survival and to changing their circumstances and life chances.

The challenges for those providers who recognise the need to support women with limited literacy were often articulated in the interviews as limitations on time and referral of clients. For example, one provider described how women clients sometimes ask the health service to assist with form-filling in the process of separating from their violent partners and applying for benefits. The health service cannot assist with this task because of time constraints. Instead, the service may refer such clients to a neighbourhood house where someone can assist. Clients may be encouraged to join an existing literacy class in that neighbourhood house as a result of this experience of assistance.

In summary, community health providers face the following dilemmas:

- too little time to support women with limited literacy;
- the need to address women's immediate needs of safety rather than long-term issues;
- the knowledge that women need a sense of safety and a venue where they can build confidence in their own ability to learn and to take power over their own lives;
- recognition that venues in which women already feel safe and which have less bureaucratic structures are likely to support better learning outcomes for women with domestic violence experiences;
- limited options to refer clients to venues that match these features.

The nature of contact between service providers and ESL/literacy providers

It appears from the data that the contact between the two sectors is occasional and, to some extent, coincidental and reliant on personal contacts, rather than there being explicit strategies in place for these two sectors to utilise each other's services for women experiencing both domestic violence and limited literacy. Opportunities to build links between the two sectors are limited by the heavy workloads of service providers. Where contact does exist between both sectors, some excellent literacy and education opportunities for women have developed.

One participant had previously worked in a TAFE institution in a number of programs, including Women's Education in the Vocational Preparation Program. She is therefore familiar with the system and uses both her knowledge of formal requirements — like accredited modules — and her informal contacts with TAFE staff in the local institute, to develop alternative ways of supporting women in domestic violence to return to study. She asserted throughout the interview that a return to study is often perceived by women as unattainable. She gave an example of three former clients who had attended classes run at the Women's Health Centre who "went on to TAFE classes and who never in their wildest dreams would have made that step on their own" (interview transcript).

One agency supports adolescent girls through schools. The participant from this agency acknowledged that there is often a difference in the behaviour of boys and girls who are having problems at school, and that it is usual for girls to become withdrawn and therefore to be less visible. As a result of their withdrawal, girls become less of a priority for assistance than a boy who is "externalising" his problems. Girls who experience violence at home or from a partner frequently drop out of school.

This agency deals mainly with counsellors in its contact with schools. How or, indeed, whether, the agency service providers, school counsellors and teachers work together on literacy issues did not emerge in this study, but the testing procedures described by this participant appear to be limited by time and funding constraints to a prescribed test. The test was described as being designed to determine whether the student falls within the normal range of skill level for that age group, or struggles with typical tasks. It appeared from the interview data that the test does not take into account the fact that performance can be impaired by preoccupation with, for example, a violent situation at home.

In summary, contact between the education and community health sectors:

- is limited by time and funding constraints;
- appears to be most effective when providers have developed personal links with key personnel in other organisations;
- does not necessarily establish a mutual understanding of the issues that face each sector in dealing with their clients' needs.

Professional development

Two possible areas for professional development for both community health service providers and ESL/literacy educators emerge from this study. Service providers would benefit from increased familiarity with the range of literacy courses for women, while professional development about domestic violence issues, existing services and resources, and change strategies, would assist ESL and literacy educators in their work. The discussion of the data so far has focused on the former, so I will consider briefly the awareness of domestic violence issues of literacy educators in this final section. These comments are based on anecdotes, cited by the research participants, of their experiences with the literacy/ESL sector, as well as my own experience of literacy workers.

It seems that there is much anxiety amongst adult literacy/ESL teachers about how to deal with the disclosures and needs of women who experience violence at home. The health and counselling resources available to women are not well known by many educators. The institutions in which they work often do not recognise the prevalence of the problem and the impact that it has on the teachers, on class dynamics, and on the women who carry the burden of the problem and need to work through their issues in a supportive environment.

Some literacy and ESL teachers do incorporate opportunities for women to talk and write about their experiences of domestic violence in class. This requires a range of complex skills and strategies to manage classes of mixed groups of clients.

In summary, professional development issues to emerge from the data include the following:

- each sector could be improved by receiving professional development about services, strategies for effective provision, and related issues for women
- there is both need and potential for an improvement in provision of services for women by combining knowledge of ESL/literacy learning and the impact that domestic violence has on women.

Conclusion

Some domestic violence service provision agencies appear to employ staff who recognise and articulate the importance of literacy in empowering women leaving domestic violence situations. Although these service providers perceive that literacy support is not part of their role, they are pro-active in supporting women with literacy needs in a variety of ways. In particular, these service providers employ strategies with clients that shift the social focus away from the belief that limited literacy is an individual problem. The main restrictions that they face in following up literacy development of clients, and in according it a higher priority in the provision of services, are lack of time and incomplete networks with ESL/literacy providers.

The research data suggests that, where service providers have stronger links with formal education providers, it is likely that referrals, the cooperative

development of courses, and ongoing discussion about the links between the two sectors take place. As a result of these links, women with limited literacy benefit by having greater access to a variety of services provided by both the health and the education sectors.

Although this research project has been small and there are areas that require further investigation, a number of possibilities for future action suggest themselves.

Recommendations

- Professional development opportunities for both community health service providers and ESL/literacy educators need to be investigated, with the aim of informing both groups about possible means of cooperating, in order to provide women who have experienced domestic violence with ESL/literacy services that acknowledge their specific needs.
- An education representative should become a member of the Western Domestic and Family Violence Action Group with the role of disseminating relevant material to educational institutions in the region, and strengthening links between domestic violence service providers and education providers.
- The possibility of developing a project to provide literacy skills development relevant to women who have experienced domestic violence, should be investigated in conjunction with Adult Community Education, Community Benefit SA, or other funding agencies. It could be located in community health centres, since these are venues in which women "moving on" from domestic violence may already feel are safe and supportive.
- Figures on the relationship between young women dropping out from school and their experience of domestic violence should be established, and a review of provision for their educational needs should be funded.
- Service providers in community health centres require updated information about ESL/literacy services and ACE programs that may be relevant to their clients.
- Managers and equity officers of institutions that provide ESL/literacy programs should undertake consultation with community health agencies and experts in the field of domestic violence, to establish how their internal resources could support classroom teachers to deal with the needs of women and issues of safety and violence in the classroom.

Notes

1. For conciseness throughout this paper, "women" will be used to talk about women who have experienced domestic violence, unless otherwise indicated.
2. Most classes in the institution where I worked were mixed, with roughly equal numbers of men and women. At that time, many of the participants were referred through the Federal Labor Government's Special Intervention Program (SIP).

3. See Stubbs, J. 1994, "Introduction", in *Women, Male Violence and the Law*, J. Stubbs (Ed.) Institute for Criminology monograph no. 6, Federation Press, Sydney.
4. Heald and Horsman (n.d.) look at issues around the language that is often used to describe women as "moving on" and how this language may contribute to silencing women and preventing them from taking the time they need to process their emotions about their experiences. I have qualified "moving on" with inverted commas in acknowledgement of their argument.
5. See the bibliography in Strategic Partners Pty Ltd and Research Centre for Gender Studies (1999b).
6. See http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au
7. "Service providers" is a term used throughout this paper to denote employees in a range of health and welfare organisations. People working in the field of educational services are denoted by the terms "educator" or "teacher".

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Feminist Approaches to the Women's Education Program in South Australian TAFE Institutes: Parallels with adult literacy pedagogies[1]

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This paper considers research into the feminist and literacy pedagogies of the Women's Education Program in TAFE SA. The research examined the feminist objectives of program lecturers and how they translate their feminist beliefs into teaching strategies. The lecturers' understandings of literacy as social practice were also explored to consider the possibility of links between feminist and literacy pedagogical approaches. Students' attitudes to the program were canvassed to understand better the value of feminist approaches in the program and the effects on students' lives. Strategies to emerge, which lecturers and students both identify as important for effective learning, include the establishment of a women-friendly classroom environment, negotiated class relationships, including a decentred role for the lecturer, and curriculum content and activities that emphasise the diverse social contexts of women, which encourage students to value and draw on their personal experience as they take control of their learning process. These strategies and the teaching objectives articulated during the research reveal feminist and literacy pedagogies in parallel in the program.

Introduction

Lecturers in the Women's Education Program in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in South Australia became interested in questions relating to feminist pedagogy through the Program Improvement Network. An inquiry into this area was suggested at quality assurance day meetings organised for lecturers in the Women's Education Program. Questions that formed the basis of our subsequent inquiry included the following:

- How do lecturers teach in Women's Education in TAFE in South Australia?
- What does it mean when we say we teach from a feminist perspective?
- What pedagogical practices do we employ?
- How do Women's Education lecturers think about their feminist practices?

In November 1999, a quality assurance day was lead by Chris Beasley, lecturer in Politics, and author of *What is Feminism Anyway? Understanding contemporary feminism* (1999) to guide discussion around these questions. It became evident that further research work needed to be done since some aspects of feminist pedagogy remained unexplored. In addition, some lecturers were asking for written information on how to teach in a feminist way. The group identified the need for a pamphlet or booklet or web site about the feminist teaching practices in Women's Education especially for the increasing number of casual, hourly paid teachers who comprise the large majority of the staff in the Women's Education Program.

The opportunity to develop a research focus from the questions generated by Women's Education lecturers was realised through a Spencer Foundation practitioner research mentoring and communication grant administered by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Research Consortium's South Australian Unit at the University of South Australia. The Spencer Foundation focuses on practitioner research and encourages teachers to reflect on what they do in their teaching practice. The grant provided an ideal opportunity and an appropriate approach to unpack feminist pedagogy in Women's Education curriculum and teaching practice.

Two further areas of investigation emerged in planning the research project. The first was a focus on literacy practices within Women's Education teaching and learning to refine the focus on feminist pedagogy. How do feminist practice and the objectives of Women's Education fit with literacy learning? A second level of inquiry was to investigate the learning experiences for students to provide another perspective to reflect on the feminist practices in the Women's Education Program. How well are lecturers achieving their objectives and the objectives of the program? How do students experience feminist pedagogy? What changes do they experience in their lives as a result of studying in Women's Education?

As the research project explored these questions, three themes emerged. First, it became clear that classroom environment, the role of the lecturer, and the curriculum contents are important components of feminist pedagogy: they were identified as critical by lecturers and students. Second, it was also evident from students' responses that lecturers in the Women's Education Program are very successful in achieving their feminist pedagogical objectives. Students were very enthusiastic about their gains from the program and easily identified what they considered to be successful teaching strategies. Many represented these strategies as feminist practices. Third, when the program is viewed from the perspective of literacy as social practice, Women's Education is also an adult literacy program. Discussions with other adult literacy educators could be mutually beneficial to the development of the Women's Education Program and other adult literacy programs.

The aim of this paper is threefold:

- to unpack and analyse the teaching practice of feminist lecturers in the pre-vocational courses for the Certificate of Women's Education from the data that we collected
- to explore possible intersections between the Women's Education Program and the objectives of adult literacy programs
- to gauge student responses and the effects of the pedagogical approaches used in Women's Education Program in TAFE SA.

The first section of the paper discusses the background to the Women's Education Program and its design. It considers the broad range of modules available based on the principle of ensuring that the content is relevant to the lives of women and establishes pathways to further learning.

The next section explains the design of the research project. It discusses the aims, the participants, the process and the approach to analysing the data that were collected.

The findings are considered in two parts. In the first, the ways in which feminist Women's Education lecturers describe their pedagogical beliefs and practices are examined. The data provide evidence for the feminist philosophies that underpin Women's Education lecturers' teaching and how they position students in the program.

This part of the findings also considers how the lecturers' practices and objectives parallel the aims of adult literacy pedagogies. Most Women's Education lecturers do not explicitly articulate literacy learning as part of their teaching practice. But, as the data show, many incorporate the principle of "literacy as social practice" into their feminist pedagogical approach to Women's Education, and many employ pedagogical practices as part of their feminist teaching that are common to adult literacy pedagogical approaches.

This section then looks at how the lecturers translate their feminist beliefs into practice by establishing women-friendly classrooms, and by encouraging students to participate actively in the designing of their learning process. Links between feminist and literacy pedagogies are drawn out in the process.

The second findings section discusses students' reflections on the Women's Education Program. The student perspectives provide another avenue for reflexive consideration of the effectiveness of feminist pedagogy in the Women's Education Program.

The background to Women's Education

The Women's Education Program in TAFE SA celebrates 25 years of operation in July 2001. Throughout the 1970s, the second wave of feminism saw women demanding social and legislative reform to address the changed and changing needs of women at this time.[2] TAFE SA responded to this repositioning of the role of women in society by undertaking an analysis of the educational needs of women, particularly women of lower socioeconomic background, in the sphere of further education. TAFE lecturers like Liz Hooper of Adelaide Institute of

TAFE and Pene Davey from the Douglas Mawson Institute of TAFE conducted surveys in the community.

The analysis identified the need:

> *to offer women opportunities to think about what they wanted to do — to work, to further study, to empower themselves by taking more control and direction in their lives, to feel internally what they want to do ... to develop a sense of self*
>
> (reiterated by Pene Davey, December 2000, Women's Education graduation ceremony, Port Adelaide)

A course in Women's Education was subsequently designed to meet this need.

The Women's Education Program has been very popular: in its revised and updated form, it now comprises the Certificate II, III and IV in Women's Education. Certificate II (204 hours), which is six months' full-time equivalent, includes the modules of "Introduction to Women's Studies", "Communication", "Working in Groups", "Career Awareness and Goal Setting", "Study Skills", "Women Using Computers", "Women and Maths" plus at least 24 hours of elective modules. Certificate III (386 hours) is nine months' full-time equivalent and includes those core modules listed above as part of Certificate II as well as "Women's Studies I" and "Speaking in Public", plus at least 144 hours of elective modules. Certificate IV (572 hours) is 12 months' full-time equivalent. It includes those core modules listed as part of Certificate III as well as "Women's Studies II", "Women's Studies III", "Research Methods", "Focus Study", and at least 168 hours of elective modules. The vocational electives available in these certificates include modules that study women in relation to specific areas, such as the Internet, health, small business, writing, the media, the law, and politics, as well as general electives related to computing, writing, interpersonal skills, and expressive arts. Other electives may be designed and offered according to availability and requests from students, such as "Women and Self-defence", "Using PowerPoint", and "Creative Writing". Linkages with other TAFE programs also extend the electives available.

The range of modules indicates the broad content and vocational pathways offered through the Women's Education Program. It includes study skills, vocational skills, literacy skills, communication skills, computer skills, and women-centred electives, which provide pathways to further and higher education. At the centre of the course content for all modules is the requirement that content relates to the lives of women. It is significant that the Women's Studies modules, which study feminism and the role and position of women in society, are core modules in each certificate level. In summary, the Women's Education Program is based on a women-centred curriculum.

The Women's Education Program is incorporated into the Vocational Preparation Program in TAFE SA. The program is offered to Certificate IV level at Elizabeth, Mount Barker, Adelaide, Port Noarlunga and Murray Bridge campuses, to Certificate III level at Port Adelaide and Panorama campuses, and to Certificate II level at Gilles Plains, Coober Pedy, Port Augusta, Port Lincoln, Mount Gambier, and Whyalla campuses. In addition, Certificate II is offered in

distance and online learning packages via Adelaide Institute of TAFE.
The program is funded by Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Commonwealth Literacy funds, and students are subsidised through a principle of access and equity for disadvantaged students. All courses are available to students at minimal cost. Students are often referred from the Job Education and Training (JET) scheme managed by Centrelink, but a majority of students enrol to realise personal objectives. This link to literacy funding and the literacy modules in the program demonstrates that a connection between feminist and adult literacy objectives was already present in the background of the Women's Education Program, quite apart from any pedagogical links in the practices of the lecturers.

The research methodology

The research project

The project team consisted of Helaine Costello, Carole Wiles and me. Helaine Costello has been a lecturer for 11 years and a coordinator in the Women's Education Program for six years. Carole Wiles has been a lecturer and coordinator in the program for 11 years. I am a part-time lecturer in the core modules of Women's Studies, Study Skills, Public Speaking Skills and Job-seeking Skills at Port Adelaide and Adelaide campuses. We identify as "active" feminists. That is, we are involved in activities that advance the interests and position of women, as identified from a gendered analysis of power relations in society, which places women at the centre of that analysis. I became interested in feminist teaching practices while assisting feminist teachers in outdoor activities for women, and through undertaking outdoor leadership training in a feminist program. We three collaborated on this project, planned how to conduct the research, and agreed that I would write a paper on the findings.

Since one of the objectives of the Spencer Foundation is to offer lecturers the opportunity to reflect on their practice, we decided to develop this approach in our project and record responses and reflections in group discussion on a focus day, which would also allow effective sharing of information. We also decided that we wanted to encourage students to participate in the reflection, in order to capture a student perspective on the Women's Education Program. We consequently planned a separate focus day for both lecturers and students as the best format to achieve this.

The focus days were therefore planned with the following objectives in mind:

- to provide lecturers with the opportunity to reflect on their feminist teaching practice — how and why they teach this way;
- to provide an opportunity for lecturers to share this information with other lecturers;
- to identify how feminist lecturers in Women's Education teach literacy skills;
- to unpack and analyse the teaching practice of some feminist lecturers in the pre-vocational courses for the Certificate of Women's Education;

- to explore possible intersections between the Women's Education Program and the objectives of adult literacy programs;
- to find out what students are experiencing and gaining from the pedagogical approach used in Women's Education Program in South Australian TAFE institutes.

The products from the research project were intended to include:

- a paper documenting the research;
- a pamphlet or brochure outlining feminist teaching practices in Women's Education for distribution to new staff, current staff and interested colleagues;
- possible development of a web site to encourage further research in these areas.

Research process

Lecturers in the Women's Education Program were sent a letter that outlined the aims of the project and invited them to participate in the lecturer focus day. The letter explained that we were interested in documenting the following:

- what feminist pedagogy in Women's Education is;
- how it happens;
- the core practices involved;
- what the students experience in Women's Education that is different from other learning situations;
- differences between teaching in Women's Education and in other adult literacy programs.

The letter outlined our approach to identification of participants; confidentiality on personal details was assured and identification of participants could be negotiated throughout the project.

A list of background questions on which lecturers could reflect accompanied the letter. These questions were designed to get lecturers thinking about issues that would be discussed on the focus day. The questions were as follows:

- What is your understanding of feminism?[3]
- What has been the history of your development of feminist thinking/practice?
- Which of your personal values and ethics derive from your feminism?
- What do you think is the objective of language, literacy and numeracy learning?
- What do you think is the objective of Women's Education?
- What does teaching literacy mean to you?
- To what extent do you see yourself as a teacher of language, literacy and numeracy?
- If you think you teach language, literacy and numeracy, how do you teach them in Women's Education?

Two readings were included with the letter for participating lecturers to read before attending the focus day. One reading consisted of a transcript of a discussion about feminist pedagogy conducted at Minnesota State University in the United States, where Carolyn Shrewsbury, a prominent writer on feminist pedagogy, is based.[4] The second reading was the paper, *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing social futures,* by the New London Group (1995), which is based at the NLLIA Centre for Workplace Communication and Culture in Haymarket in the United Kingdom. The purpose of the chosen readings was to encourage participants to reflect upon feminist pedagogical practices as well as on current definitions and approaches to literacy. Many lecturers would not normally describe their work as "adult literacy".

The research team discussed the sort of students to approach for the student focus day. We wanted students who could articulate and be objective about their experiences in Women's Education, but they did not necessarily have to identify as feminist. We realised that these criteria potentially selected out certain students on the basis of those very literacy skills that we would be discussing at the focus days. To ensure a diversity of student participants, we aimed for a spread from different campuses and certificate levels, and I was keen to have new students represented. Students from Elizabeth, Mount Barker, Port Adelaide, Adelaide, and Noarlunga campuses were approached. We also aimed to have students attend in pairs so that each student would already know someone.

Targetted students were sent a letter explaining the background and rationale of the research project with a list of background questions about which to think before attending a separate focus day. The questions that we sent to potential student participants to consider were as follows:

- What do you think you have gained or achieved by participating in Women's Education at TAFE?
- Women's Education is pro-women: what do you experience as the pro-women effects, outcomes, and practices in Women's Education classes?
- Is there any difference between your Women's Education women-only classes and other women-only classes or groups you may have experienced?
- How is your experience of learning with women in Women's Education classes different from class to class e.g., Women's Studies, Computing, Study Skills, electives and so on?
- How do you feel and experience in the more explicitly feminist classes of Women's Studies?
- How would you describe your relationship or connection with other students in the class?
- How would you describe your relationship with Women's Education lecturers? (We remember you have had many lecturers, and that your comments are general and not personal ones.)

We also asked potential student participants to provide us with a paragraph about their involvement in Women's Education, their goals when they had finished, and some general background; students were assured of confidentiality in respect of their personal details.

Focus day format

At both focus days, which were held at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE in mid-December 2000, participants were required to answer some set questions and then to engage in group discussion of the questions. The procedure required the participants work in pairs on each question; one woman would verbally reflect and respond to the question, while the other would scribe for 15 minutes. They would then swap roles. The emphasis in this activity was on reflection rather than debate or discussion. This task required both active listening and accurate scribing. Each piece of pair work was then followed by a half-hour whole-group discussion of the question. This discussion was recorded by me, as a non-participant in the discussion, both in written form and on audiotape.

The lecturers' focus day included four questions for consideration that built on the background questions that were included in their invitations to participate in the focus day. The first asked how the lecturers' understandings of feminism — beliefs, practices, theories, objectives, outcomes and limitations — influenced their teaching. The second asked what lecturers thought the objective of teaching literacy, language and numeracy was in their practices in Women's Education, and how they did it. They were asked for exemplars, critical incidents, or descriptions of lessons in which Women's Education intersected with literacy, language and numeracy to illustrate. The third question asked how lecturers brought these two areas together in their teaching practices. Finally, they were asked to think about how their focus day involvement might affect their future teaching practice and their views on being lecturers in Women's Education.

The student focus day included three questions for consideration. The first asked about what they saw as the value of studying Women's Education — for example, gains, achievements, things learnt, specific skills or abilities, new ideas. The second asked how the pro-women approach of Women's Education influenced their learning. For example, the questions asked them to consider what helped and hindered them, as well as what worked for them and what did not, such as structure of classes, assessment, treatment of individuals, relationships with lecturers and other students, expectations or any other area that they thought relevant. The third question asked how studying Women's Education affected students' views of themselves, their social relationships including family life, and their involvement in paid or unpaid work.

Method of analysis

The scribed notes and tape recordings comprised the data for analysis. Participants' responses were looked at for common threads and for points of departure. This approach allowed an assessment of the effectiveness of lecturers'

objectives, an analysis of their feminist pedagogy, and an examination of a feminist curriculum from both lecturer and student perspectives. Lecturers' responses were also examined in the light of relevant literature on feminism and literacy to locate their practice within a theoretical framework.

Participants

The research participants comprised ten lecturers and fourteen students from different locations in the Women's Education Program. Lecturers were selected for their experience in teaching in Women's Education and as representatives of a range of both rural and urban TAFE institutes including Elizabeth campus of Regency Institute of TAFE, Adelaide Institute of TAFE, Noarlunga campus and Mount Barker campus of Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE, and Gilles Plains campus of Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE. Unfortunately, lecturers from more rural campuses were unable to attend. The broad curriculum areas of Computing, Maths, Women's Studies, General Studies, and Vocational Studies were covered in the selection of lecturers also. Most but not all had been active feminists. All those who accepted the invitation identify as feminist. Both Helaine and Carole were full participants in the lecturer focus day.

At least two students were selected from each of the urban campuses in Adelaide, Port Adelaide, Elizabeth, Noarlunga, and semi-rural Mount Barker. All invited students attended; an additional two attended from Elizabeth and Noarlunga campuses. The student participants included current students at each certificate level to represent the voices of both new and experienced students.

Findings: lecturers' voices

Feminist pedagogy in Women's Education

We would argue that a feminist approach places women at the centre of any analysis including pedagogical practice. Shrewsbury suggests:

> *Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning — engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change.*
>
> (1993a, 8)

Such a feminist approach rejects a "severed head" approach to education and embraces a notion of teaching the whole person — with a mind, emotions, body, and gender (hooks 1994: 14–17, Horsman 1999: 180). While not all lecturers put their sentiments in exactly this way, as a group, their beliefs and philosophy reflected a similar approach to Shrewsbury's.

Lecturers commonly expressed the belief that all women deserve the opportunity to fulfill their potential. For many women, the opportunity to participate fully in school learning was interrupted by external factors like violence, economic disadvantage, family breakdown, or parental beliefs about

the role and position of women in society (see Horsman 1990; Horsman 1999). The Women's Education Program therefore provides what is sometimes termed "a second chance" in adult and continuing education.

The lecturers believe that each woman's life experience is very important and deserves validation. One lecturer said: "You start with the absolute belief in the potential of every woman student. Most teachers seek to facilitate the development of any student's potential, but the belief that every woman has enormous potential is a feminist standpoint." Lecturers asserted that it is the right of each student to be treated with respect and to be supported and encouraged as they build confidence and skills.

The taking account of the multiple roles, historical positioning and experience of each woman seems to be critical in the teaching and learning exchange of all modules in the Women's Education Program. Lecturers perceive students as "knowers" already: they encourage students to draw on their own experience and to use it as a basis for analysis in their learning and for relating theory to practice and practice to theory. They aim for their students to act as subjects rather than objects. This approach enables students to be reflective, to observe themselves and their women peers, and to sense possibilities and capabilities for themselves outside the classroom. This perspective delivers new understandings, new knowledges, and new skills for the women in the Women's Education Program and, thereby, it enables a wider range of choices for students.

The lecturers believe that their role as teachers is not to impart knowledge but to facilitate learning. They encourage learners to identify their learning needs and to develop a critical understanding of learning as a process — what hooks has termed "engaged pedagogy" (1994: 6). They suggested that it is the lecturer's responsibility to support and meet these needs.

hooks also describes as central to feminist pedagogical objectives a dialogic process between student and teacher and the creation of "participatory spaces for sharing of knowledge" (1994: 15, my emphasis). The lecturers described a similar pedagogical objective. They expressed this objective in terms of creating a classroom where women know that they are really important and supporting women to build confidence, to become motivated to set goals, and to find the knowledge and develop the skills that they want so that they can take control of their lives and access more choices. The lecturers argued that it was both an educational objective and a feminist principle that learners recognise and understand their own learning process and take responsibility for their learning.

Most lecturers emphasised the importance of recognising and valuing diversity. This recognition involves openly discussing and respecting the differences of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, age, and, obviously, gender. The lecturers suggested that this recognition applies across the curriculum and is studied explicitly in Women's Studies modules.

The word "empower" was often stated as an objective by lecturers. In reflection, one lecturer described empowered women in this way: "as able to set goals and achieve success results and outcomes, while understanding the world, its structures, power inequalities and their journeys in these". Her words imply

the ability of a woman to take control of her life by developing planning, organisational, and learning skills, to envisage a different future, to understand her environment and the systems that affect how women live in the world, to have a knowledge of different peoples' access and resistance to differing amounts of power, and to relate this information to her own past, present and future.

As Shrewsbury suggests:

> *By focusing on empowerment, feminist pedagogy embodies a concept of power as energy, capacity, and potential rather than as domination ... Under conceptions of power as capability, the goal is to increase the power of all actors, not to limit the power of some.*
>
> (1993a: 10)

Other objectives stated by the lecturers were to develop women's self-confidence, self-esteem, self-awareness, and for women to know what they want.

Three lecturers referred to a social change objective as part of their approach and part of their notion of empowerment — that students have the skills to be "able to change the world to the way they want it to be" because they believe that feminist pedagogy is, as Shrewbury suggests, "concerned with gender justice and overcoming oppressions" (1993a: 9). These lecturers wanted it to be understood that the objective of social change is not imposed on students; rather, students become empowered to act this way according to their own wishes and desires. The lecturers suggested that to impose personal, professional, or political agendas or to radicalise students would cut across their feminist objectives of teaching students what they want to know and of students' being in charge of their learning process (see also Lloyd, Ennis & Atkinson 1994a: 139). One lecturer described how her students, of their own volition, made a submission to the Federal Government's national inquiry into the education of boys conducted by Dr. Brendan Nelson MP in 2000.

It is a requirement of most modules that the content be related to women's lives and experience. Several of the lecturers articulated the feminist philosophy underpinning this approach of relating theory to practice — of feminist praxis. A computing and maths lecturer described a feminist objective of many of the Women's Education modules, including her own, as follows: "for women to come away with a sense of women's role and women's history in the area [module content], for women to see this as a context for their learning, and to give women the tools to 'survive' and a basis for further learning". Many of the lecturers made similar comments about their relating course content to women's lives and for students to relate course content to their own lives.

To this extent, then, most of the lecturers to whom we spoke perceive the curriculum of the Women's Education Program as a feminist or "woman-centred" curriculum.

Lecturers' conceptions of literacy

For the purposes of this project, our approach is to view literacy as social practice; it includes the knowledge and skills necessary to live in society in the way an individual desires and to bring about social change. As members of a diverse society, we engage in multiple social practices. The New London Group (1995) uses the term "multiliteracies" to promote the idea of literacy as social practice and as more than working with written text. Multiliteracies refer to:

> *...the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on. This is particularly important in the mass media, multimedia, and in an electronic hypermedia ... [It is also] a way to focus on the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness. Dealing with linguistic differences and cultural differences has now become central to the pragmatics of our working, civic, and private lives.*
>
> (New London Group 1995: 7)

Multiliteracies are instrumental in what the New London Group calls "designing a social future" — an objective of literacy learning. This approach to literacy, which we have employed in the project in our conversations with participants, broadens the narrow understanding of literacy as "language, literacy and numeracy", or "LLN", and repositions LLN as under the umbrella of this broader conception of literacy.

Participants had an opportunity to think about this approach before the focus day because we had sent them an article on multiliteracies by the New London Group. Most lecturers saw teaching literacy as "embedded", "interwoven", or "integrated" in the Women's Education Program. Some played down, and others played up, the importance of literacy. Some lecturers named literacy skills as of intrinsic importance, and some, as a means to an end. Discussion ranged from literacy in a narrow LLN sense, to literacy as lifelong or survival skills, or as multiliteracies. Most commonly, lecturers used the broader definition of literacy as "social literacy" and referred to LLN skills as a subset.

Some lecturers were clearly of the view that the Women's Education Program is a literacy program. These lecturers suggested that literacy skills are the means of achieving the feminist objectives of the Women's Education Program. Literacy skills are the means to an end of student empowerment, self-actualisation, social change and social justice.

Some lecturers who agreed with the notion that the broadened objective of literacy is to be able to design one's own social future, saw this objective as problematic, however, if it referred mainly to gaining employment. They stressed that a "social future" included far more than getting a job, and must incorporate all possible choices. One lecturer spoke of social literacy as: "reading signs in the rest of the world ... including what is not negotiable and knowing what to do".

Another described it this way:

> *I am coming to grips with the "naming" of social literacy, not what it contains, but calling it "social literacy". It is implicit in the way I teach, rather than it being a separate thing I am conscious of. My feminism came before my teaching practice so I brought lots of the values of social action, working for change, working together. So those values of social literacy are there ... They are intertwined in my thinking and practices [and in] what I try to achieve.*

She revealed a notion of social literacy that was more active than, but similar to, the notion of "knowing what to do".

There was general agreement that the teaching of LLN skills was interwoven throughout the curriculum like a tapestry. Communication, Study Skills, Women and Maths, and Speaking in Public are examples of core modules that explicitly teach conventional LLN skills. In addition, the core module, Women Using Computers, and the many computing electives available, are evidence of the recognition of computing skills as part of the essential skills required for contemporary and future society. The lecturers also pointed out that computing and LLN skills are involved in the learning of every elective.

So lecturers were, for the most part, cognisant of literacy as a part of their pedagogical practice, but not all named the Women's Education Program as a literacy program. The next section discusses how the lecturers articulated the "fit" between the objectives of their feminist pedagogy and those of literacy pedagogies.

Parallels between feminist and literacy pedagogies

Most lecturers stated that they do not use the word "literacy" in the classroom because of the associations of deficit with the term (cf. Horsman 1990: 124–33). From their feminist perspectives, which encourage belief in women's potential, terms that position women as deficit should be avoided. They argued that many women have had limited opportunity or have been forced to make choices other than continue schooling because of their positioning in society. They instead refer to "developing skills in writing, reading, and computers".[5]

The lecturers did see similarities in the objectives of feminist and literacy pedagogies, but expressed the relationship between these pedagogies in different ways. Some did not differentiate feminist and literacy pedagogies, but saw them as interconnected:

> *I use adult literacy to challenge the status quo — can't separate ...*
>
> *The students come to get skills to fit in, but actually get other skills to challenge ..*

One lecturer rejected the notion of an intersection of separate pedagogies. For her, feminism is a way of being, and the teaching of literacy skills, especially writing and critical skills, is completely interwoven:

> *Feminism and literacy have got to be in my teaching. Language is patriarchal in origin, therefore I deconstruct words frequently. I query*

> *authorship, who defines, who makes the meaning of language? What does the word "sorry" mean? Deconstruction creates space.*

Later, this lecturer stated that she does not give answers but "keeps asking the students questions".

Others saw feminist and literacy pedagogies as in parallel:

> *I don't think there is an intersection but they [feminism and teaching LLN] are interwoven within my teaching practice ... They are an interwoven tapestry. Both impact on each other.*

> *Not about intersection. It is parallel; Women's Education and adult literacy run alongside each other continuously.*

One lecturer observed both convergence and divergence of objectives at the intersection of feminism and teaching literacy skills:

> *Women's Education and the teaching of LLN are about empowerment, for people to feel capable of meeting any challenge they choose in life. But the aim of "literacy" differs from a feminist point of view in that feminism challenges the status quo, and "literacy" traditionally is to fit into society in a particular way. My definition of feminist literacy is to get the skills to change the world to the way I want it to be. To fit in is OK at times.*

A noticeable theme in the lecturers' responses is the development of critical literacy or critical thinking skills. The importance of critical literacy is evident in the comments about deconstruction of language. Other lecturers spoke about deconstructing social structures and power relationships and asking questions about meaning-making and the functioning of language.

In summary, then, the points of convergence in the objectives of feminism, the Women's Education Program, and literacy learning — whether as intersections or parallels — include the objectives of developing critical thinking, empowerment, and skills to meet the challenges of life and to participate in social change. To these I would add the importance of student-centred learning and of encouraging learners to take control of their learning process and goals, although the connection was not explicitly expressed as such.

Translating theory into classroom practice

We asked the lecturers how they used their feminist and literacy objectives in their teaching strategies. We found that, in respect of literacy, they at times reverted to a narrower understanding of literacy when they discussed this issue. Where this has occurred, I have used the acronym "LLN" — literacy, language and numeracy — to demonstrate when the lecturers meant literacy skills rather than broader social practices. The lecturers were also less inclined to describe as parallels any similarities between feminist praxis and literacy practice in their specific teaching strategies, than they had been when they discussed their pedagogical objectives. As a result, we have grouped together those similar or parallel strategies, by which lecturers put their feminist and literacy teaching objectives into practice, to draw attention to the pedagogical connections. They identified a range of strategies for putting their feminist objectives into practice.

These include a "women-friendly" class environment, with negotiated positive class norms that encourage respect and active listening, "women-only" space as part of this strategy, rounds, group discussion that encourages students to view each other as valuable resources, negotiated learning, and a decentred and less authoritative role for the lecturer. In general, they identified journal writing, the readings, small group discussion, assessment tools, such as essays, presentations, reports and classroom methods, and homework activities as the means by which LLN skills are learnt. These range in complexity from basic levels in Certificate II in term one, to university-level readings, research, essays and presentation by the end of term four for a full-time student who has progressed to Certificate IV.

Class environment

A common theme in answer to the questions of how one teaches LLN skills, and how these practices are brought together with feminist strategies, produced responses about setting up a feminist classroom environment. Lecturers emphasised the absolute importance of establishing a women-friendly classroom environment for effective learning. This environment was variously described as "a good classroom where women know they are really important" and which required facilitators "set up a totally safe environment, validate each woman's experiences, affirm different opinions and differences, support each woman's intelligence — 'you can do it' ... encouraging every student to speak ... [where they are], as a student said, one day 'listened into being'.

Another lecturer described it this way:

> *I think with my practice, it is important to create a safe space to grow and explore and maybe speak of things you wouldn't feel able to do outside. Establishing this safe place is critical. When I don't do that, the whole learning process is unsatisfying for me and students. I would like this to just happen as a matter of course, not to have to consciously work towards setting up this safety ...*

Due to the particular objectives of Women's Education, a women-only space in the classroom, with women as teachers, mentors and role models, has come to be considered as absolutely essential to the creation of a safe validating environment. The lecturers did not mention this at focus day; I believe this absence is because the use of women-only space is such a given condition. Applications are made regularly by the Women's Education Program to provide women-only classes, under clause 47, "Special Temporary Measures", of the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* (SA).

The lecturers mainly associated this strategy with feminist pedagogy, but it was also identified as part of literacy teaching strategies. In teaching computing skills, one lecturer is quite particular about setting up the classroom environment first. She starts with:

> *stories of women and their lives to reinforce what is happening in other areas in which I don't teach. I start conversations in Computing that have not got things to do with computing but are about women. This leads to an environment of comfort which then flows on into the challenging area of computing.*

She seeks to complement what is covered in other modules and other classes, to reduce the divide between technical and other subjects. In this way, she is connecting her feminist pedagogical objectives with her literacy objectives.

Class relationships

Most lecturers emphasised the value of establishing class norms because it creates a caring respectful and supportive environment in the classroom. Students state their wants, which are discussed in class. They usually include respect, confidentiality, valuing each other's opinions, no put-downs, active listening, responsibility to participate, one person speaking at a time, no interrupting, praise rather than criticism, sharing time, and punctuality. A list often used or addressed by Women's Education lecturers called "Agreements for Working Together" includes the following:

- participation in discussion is balanced (silences are OK);
- when someone speaks, others attend and build on that contribution;
- confidentiality is observed;
- individual differences are valued and respected;
- we do not "put ourselves down";
- criticism is caring and constructive;
- positive feedback and "strokes" are given often to each other;
- positive feedback and "strokes", when received, are acknowledged and allowed to sink in;
- we avoid making comments that are sexist or racist or statements of prejudice.

The establishment of this environment enables the development of trust, respect and safety, which underpins the preparedness of students to speak freely, to make mistakes, to show vulnerability, to ask questions, to say "I don't understand/know", to disclose, to explore and share personal experience, to think aloud, to guess, to challenge processes, and to experiment. For some women, this may be the first time that they have such an opportunity to examine their own lives and thoughts, to hear about other women's lives and thoughts, to see commonalities and differences, and to know they are not alone or at fault in their often difficult lives.

It also encourages students to take the authority to reinforce the class norms and actively value diversity. When "put-downs" of self or others, or sexist, racist or homophobic comments are made, one lecturer "waits thirty seconds to see if a student will interrupt" before she addresses the comments. Shrewsbury (1993a: 8) describes the feminist classroom as a liberatory classroom "where people care about each other's learning as well as their own ... [and] members learn to respect each other's differences rather than fear them." This is what the strategy of establishing class norms, or "normas" as the lecturers put it, sets out to achieve.

One of the common methods that is employed to encourage every student to speak is the use of rounds at the beginning and end of the session. The round may relate to session content or describe how students are feeling "right now", or

"about this module", or "something you are looking forward to" of a personal nature. This strategy provides space for every woman to speak, to be heard, and to make space for others' speaking and listening. Lecturers were clear that it is important that the presence of every student is acknowledged.

Another important teaching practice named by lecturers is "listening very carefully to students". Listening is part of validating and affirming students. One student subsequently described this process as "being listened into being". Furthermore, listening contradicts the silence some women have adopted about very significant aspects of their lives. For instance, research in Canada conducted by Diane Eastman reveals that, when women identify and address issues of violence and abuse in their lives, it leads to positive outcomes in literacy learning (Lloyd, Ennis & Atkinson 1994a: 45–59). The strategies of listening and encouraging oracy development also achieve the feminist objective of building confidence and encouraging women to change their social position.

Interestingly, some lecturers identified LLN teaching strategies to achieve some of their feminist strategies. Some lecturers spoke about the importance of adapting language use to encourage students' development of confidence. For instance, some use more generic terms at the beginning of Certificate II and introduce formal words later as students become comfortable with their learning process e.g., "finding out something about a topic and writing it down" becomes "research" and "finding out and sharing a point of view" becomes "presenting a report".

When teaching maths, one lecturer uses another strategy to minimise her authority in the area to the students. She explains her lack of a maths background, that she is the same as them in this respect, and that she is only one step ahead of them. This lecturer is consciously reducing the widespread anxiety so many women have about learning numeracy skills. She specifically aims to develop students' belief that it is manageable. She adopts:

> *a "let's do this together" approach. I let students correct mistakes on the board, and always relate it [maths] to women's lives. I start with talking about women mathematicians and end with an exercise raising money for a Women's Health Centre.*

Her main aim in teaching numeracy she expressed this way: "What I offer students is confidence in the learning process".

This approach adopts the feminist dialogic process, of which hooks has spoken (1994: 21):

> *Teachers need to show their vulnerability while encouraging students to take risk ... Teachers don't expect students to take risks that teachers would not themselves, or to share in any way that the teacher would not share too. Teachers take the first risk linking confessional narratives to academic discussions to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material.*

So there is a combining here of feminist and LLN teaching strategies.

This same lecturer spoke about the importance of letting students in Study Skills talk about their emotional reactions to essay writing — their perceptions, fears, what their reactions mean. She suggested that it is important to deconstruct and, in the process, disempower the word "essay". Another lecturer suggested that her asking students to "write down the words inside their heads, their thoughts and feelings about essay writing as these occur for five minutes" is an effective way to identify blocks to learning about essay writing. Both lecturers are addressing the emotional life of the student by recognising the role played by feelings in the learning process and by considering the personal life experience of students as part of an holistic approach to the learner (cf. hooks 1994: 14–17; Horsman 1999: 169–214).

Solity (1999b: 7–8) writes of the increasing importance of developing "emotional literacy" based on Goleman's (1996) findings about the value and increasing demand for "emotional intelligence" in society. Solity (1999b: 8) cites Goleman's statement of the benefits of emotional literacy as including emotional self-awareness, understanding, recognising, and naming emotions, understanding the cause of feelings, and recognising the difference between feelings and action.[6]

These lecturers gave evidence of their belief that the emotions that are part of students' approaches to their learning, must be addressed to support their learning. The lecturers identified a range of teaching practices to encourage the development of emotional literacy, including rounds, listening and whole group discussion about students' feelings about their progress and learning activities. These strategies are further supported in the curriculum with modules like Communication, Dealing with Conflict, and Women and Counselling Skills. Again, this consideration of emotional literacy in the lecturers' teaching practices demonstrates a coming together of literacy and feminist pedagogies in the facilitation of changing social practice, and the supportive treatment of women as they negotiate their goals and concerns in learning.

Group work

The lecturers' approach to the role of the teacher in the learning process is a decentred role. They use group work to facilitate their feminist objective of space for personal speaking, sharing, listening and reflecting on each other's experiences, the development of emotional literacy, and the opportunity to apply theory to personal experience. Group work reduces individual isolation and assists the development of social connections between women, collaboration, and teamwork. One lecturer described how she deliberately facilitates the exchange of phone numbers as well as the sharing of plenty of time and space for social connection and as a support to women's learning. Horsman (1990: 217) maintains that reducing boredom and breaking isolation are significant and legitimate reasons for women wanting to resume learning. The importance of this approach is illustrated in the words of one lecturer:

> *Part of the dynamic is to encourage the belief that I am only one of the tools available for learning. I constantly challenge and question my own power as a teacher. Students want to see me as a technical expert. I*

> *encourage women to share knowledge with each other, rather than relying on me. This encourages self-confidence, and a belief in the power of the self ... I feel the need to ensure the individual is in control of the learning process. The group is important in the process — we gain so much from interaction. Thus I draw on the tools of social interaction and mutual support, building trust ... I use these to counteract a mechanistic approach to learning.*

Another lecturer demonstrated that she decentres her role as teacher when she tells her students:

> *that they'll learn more from other students than the lecturer and [I] make time for students to spend time together — small groups, long breaks ... It is OK to think I'm wrong ... They can challenge and disagree with me all the way and still pass — as long as they're thinking not reacting ... A lot of what I do is based on group work ... I start off being daggy to let them know I'm human and make mistakes.*

Group work is thus a feminist practice in terms of the way in which students' experiences and knowledge are valued as learning resources, as well as in the way that students are encouraged to take control of their learning. Such strategies for student-centred learning are also important in the pedagogical approach of multiliteracies, in terms of learners' designing their social futures. Another parallel between feminist and literacy pedagogies is revealed.

Journals

Journals are an especially important part of the lecturers' feminist approach to teaching LLN skills. They are a space for a feminist praxis where students apply theory to personal experience and vice versa. For many, this space enables personal reflection, exploration, expression and analysis, and is a new experience which requires the development of literacy and language skills, as well as emotional literacy. Horsman (1990: 222) argues: "literacy programs [are] an opportunity ideally where both teacher and student learn; one improving her literary skills and the other learning about the lives of those from whom she may have been long insulated. Both may discover commonalities." Journals provide the opportunity for this type of mutual learning.

Lecturers discussed in detail how they respond to journals, because of the very special part they play in students' learning, their self-awareness, personal growth and skill development. As a way of lecturers' respecting this process, journals are often not "marked". Some lecturers avoid red pen altogether, but may use pencil if a student requests marking; comments may be made on a separate piece of paper to avoid writing on a student's journal. Usually (but not always) journals are handed in, and they are used to establish personal dialogue between lecturer and student. Some lecturers correspond and write a letter in response. In some classes, they are collected and returned in a multi-use envelope to ensure respect and privacy and to support the development of correspondence.

These practices encourage students to write more freely, to write more and with less fear, to explore and share personal ideas and experiences, and to enjoy reading a written reply from the lecturer. In this way, journal writing is one of the "participatory spaces for sharing of knowledge", which bell hooks (1994: 15) considers a characteristic feature of the feminist classroom, as well as a way of encouraging literacy development.

Critical literacy

Several lecturers emphasised the importance of learners' developing skills to be able to look at their learning more critically — to be able to develop an understanding of learning as a process and an understanding of its social contexts. One lecturer describes her approach to teaching literacy skills as "learning to learn":

> *We need to demystify literacy e.g., grammar. I point out to students you use grammar all the time, but you will go further if you know some rules ... Everything we do involves language and literacy. New language is introduced in each subject, and to each other. Students write reflections, journals and read and expand their vocabulary. Many have never encountered this before. I make the classroom a place where it is OK not to know things. I encourage students to ask "What does that word mean?" ... Good language and literacy learning is integrated.*

Another example of teaching LLN skills that incorporates a simultaneous emphasis on developing critical literacy skills is evident in this lecturer's comment:

> *Language literacy and numeracy is interwoven, especially language. Talking with students about language, about signs and symbols and where they come from is a constant process. Having them understand their own language and where that came from, and knowing they can use it or change it. It is important to have an environment where they can talk and speak without criticism and put-downs for the words they say and use. The verbal process is very important. You can think first and change [your words] if you want to, you have a choice, but know that your speaking is OK.*

The creation of space for women to speak, and the contradiction of the silencing of women are both feminist and literacy objectives.

This lecturer also appears to include an understanding of how social class affects the construction and value of language in her approach. This awareness of how categories of meaning like class and gender interact, is consistent with feminist objectives of an holistic approach to those aspects of women's lives that influence their learning. It also corresponds to Solity's argument that: '[w]omen need to have their cultural knowledge, language and communication skills valued whilst also learning to deconstruct and use the dominant cultural values and discourses in Australian society" (Solity 1999a: 16). Solity takes this position as a result of her research into the vocational training needs of women in adult literacy programs in Australia.

A lecturer who teaches Introduction to Computing, Word Processing, Women and the Internet, and other computing modules, extends her teaching of literacy skills to include students' becoming literate in new media, in new forms of communication, and to their having a critical approach to the media itself, to be critical about from where we get our words: "[T]he words on the Internet — who put them there? How do we know they are true? How do we check? How do we know the political stance and agenda of the web sites? It is about challenging the acceptance of the information." Her approach to teaching literacy involves a deconstruction of the power and meaning of the Internet, and the development of a critical literacy in media.

Pedagogical strategies beyond the classroom

Two coordinator lecturers also mentioned administrative solutions so that "students aren't working from a deficit model" in the development of LLN skills. One designs the Women's Education timetable with the Certificate in Preparatory Education (CPE) modules in mind, so that students may study in other areas and at other levels that better suit their needs. She argued: "This avoids setting up students to fail".

Another coordinator acknowledged the importance of support given by administrative staff who work creatively with restrictive computerised management systems to assist some students to study across different TAFE courses, in accordance with students' needs.

So the lecturers identified a range of strategies that they use to put their feminist objectives into practice and, at the same time, they demonstrated the way in which these strategies converge with their teaching of literacy. The decentring of the authority of the teacher creates space for other authorities and for students to speak, to take charge of the learning process, and to take responsibility for the learning environment. As students do these things, they shift from silence to giving voice, from being objects to becoming subjects, from being victims to becoming agents in their own lives. By establishing and taking responsibility for the classroom learning environment, through the development of negotiated class norms based on trust and respect, students are involved in designing their learning process. A shift in power and valued knowledge from teacher to student occurs. Students are encouraged to be the enforcers of class norms and agreements and, thereby, to take control of their learning process, to say what they want to learn, to suggest improvements, and to identify and ensure their learning style is supported.

Findings: students' voices

The discussions at the student focus day only addressed the feminist pedagogical dimensions of the Women's Education Program. Students were not asked to engage in a critical discussion of their literacy learning. Specifically, we were interested in what students had to say about:

- the value of learning in Women's Education in terms of gains, achievements, specific skills or abilities, and new ideas

- the process of learning in Women's Education e.g., the pro-women approach, helps and hindrances, what worked and what did not
- the effects on their lives of studying Women's Education in a feminist learning environment.

Students' gains from Women's Education

In response to the questions of the value of studying Women's Education, and what students have gained or achieved in Women's Education, the students produced lengthy and very detailed reflections. They listed many practical and technical skills e.g., communication skills, organisation skills, computer skills, study skills, public speaking skills, goal-setting skills, and various writing and maths skills. Some mentioned a knowledge of feminism as a gain, and two mentioned using problem-solving skills to resolve family problems. Most mentioned empowerment as a gain from the program, and a newfound or developed sense of themselves as gendered agents. Students also listed various social skills and new understandings which they valued highly, e.g., teamwork, socialising skills, "woman's solidarity", world awareness, and connection with other women in other countries.

Students did feel "affirmed" and "validated" as a result of lecturers' putting their feminist beliefs and philosophy into practice. One student suggested that she "achieved because of [the] lecturer's belief in me". Students' notes and discussion indicated that their heightened awareness of recognising and respecting diversity, as well as the opportunity to analyse and reflect upon their lives, clearly delivered new understandings about themselves and their location in society. Students valued the establishment of equal partnership in the classroom, and spoke about recognising and taking responsibility for their learning. They gave much evidence of their personal growth and awareness of themselves as whole people, with increased control of their lives, an increased "knowing what they want", and the capacity to set goals for "designing their social futures".

Understanding gender

But more than knowing themselves as whole people, some students talked about knowing themselves as women: "I am proud as a woman", "we are here as women", "we are all women. Issues and struggles we have experienced bond us all together". Some students referred to "solidarity with other women" and "strength from being female". These students are proudly and positively claiming a gendered role in society, and an awareness of gendered social practice and agency.

Women's Studies is a core module at each certificate level. Students study women's roles and positions in society at Certificate II and III levels and, at Certificate IV level, different notions and theories of feminism are studied. Some students identified themselves explicitly as feminist:

Learnt the politics of feminism and loved it. Can now see myself as a feminist

... gained self-confidence as a woman because of pro-woman approach.

Women's Studies was a very emotional eye-opener, an enormous area for growth. Initially only to get a job, maths, computing etc. Personal growth had not been considered. It has given me a quest for knowledge ...

I call myself a feminist now.

It taught me about conditioning.

Feminism fills the gap when the conditioning is gone.

... didn't know my own family history — feel proud about myself — proud about myself as a woman.

These students articulated that, through their study of Women's Studies in the Women's Education Program, they have gained an understanding of the gendered world they inhabit, and what this means for them as gendered individuals with past, present and future paths in that world. This knowledge led one student to "the realisation that how I am treated by some men isn't personal, but an attitude towards women in general", which seemed personally liberating for her.

Empowerment

Frequently, students used the word "empowerment" in notes and discussion to describe their gains. But what does "empowerment" mean for students? The range of understandings of this term emerged in their varied responses:

... huge sense of achievement — have set long term goals — found a direction for the future ...

I can achieve whatever I want to do now. It may take me longer than some others, but I'll get there ...

... my self-esteem rocketted skywards ...

... confidence gained is unbelievable — inner strength ...

... made me a more interesting, independent person with more to say ...

I have a life. I no longer let people control me.

"Empowerment" in the students' voices clearly involves issues of strength, independence and the capacity to take control of their lives and achieve self-determined goals. In addition, there were the frequent references to increased self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect, self-awareness, self-discipline, and belief in self:

My self-esteem has been blown out of the water ...

I stand up for myself ...

I have a direction not focused on my child ...

I have a life now ... I am not just Brian's mum.

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Just as lecturers emphasised the importance of "emotional literacy", students recognised in their responses that the value of learning in Women's Education goes beyond skills acquisition into social practices:

> *... a lot of self-realisation ... [I] acquired stronger emotional tools in dealing with past issues.*
>
> *[I] gained much more emotionally ...*
> *... inner peace ... life is good ...*
>
> *I feel I have direction, [an] energised, complete, whole person that has a purpose ...*
> *I am happier with me.*

Other gains mentioned, that also link with the notion of "empowerment", reveal a positively changed sense of self or identity, improved relationships with others, and changed power relations and positions within family and society.

These comments demonstrate that not only is the development of empowerment a central gain in students' understandings of the value of studying Women's Education, but that this development is experienced in many ways. This diversity of experience, I suggest, attests to the holistic approach of the program to women as subjects, and the way that the program relates the learning process to women's lives and social contexts.

The process of learning in Women's Education

It is evident from students' responses, that students' classroom experience and the objectives of the Women's Education Program are indeed what students identify as important, effective, valuable and necessary for their learning. One student's reflections sum up what many students expressed. Her process of learning has been:

> *achieved by unique atmosphere of motivation and encouragement from lecturer and other students. Non-competitive, sharing, supportive, safe environment to have a go, be heard, listened to without discrimination and put-downs. Nurturing, caring and understanding of like-minded women, cooperativeness. Through enthusiasm, respect, and confidentiality. Unique way of teaching of the lecturers. Lecturer was also a guide. Not lectured at, everything discussed, encouragement to speak. Lecturers were part of a group approachable, helpful, encouraging, motivating, respectful, non-critical.*

Others picked up on the significance of their relationship with the lecturer in encouraging them: "The relationship with lecturers — total respect. Left me in awe about their commitment to students i.e. I felt valued just for showing up to class". Some students also indicated that they valued being able to negotiate with their lecturers about their learning process, "having a conversation" as one put it, and used words like "approachable" and "supportive" in this context.

Learning as a process

Students also showed an awareness and understanding of their own learning as a process when they identified these other strategies as positive:

- safety — freedom to self-disclose;
- learning at own pace;
- day-at-a-time focus;
- motivation fed;
- constant affirmation to be one's own person;
- no right or wrong answers;
- small groups that provide safety and encourage bonding, self-disclosure, and more talk;
- lecturers' promotion of the value of each student — of "I matter";
- students and lecturers' belief in each student's success and ability;
- ability of lecturers to relate learning to students' daily lives.

Class relationships and environment

Interpersonal relations clearly influenced students' learning. Many students identified "class norms" as a key strategy in establishing the kind of classroom environment that they identified as essential for their learning. They identified class norms as the mechanism for establishing safety, trust and respect, for reducing fear, and as a clear agreement on behaviour and expectations that can be referred to when standards and practices are not acceptable to the students. Students spoke about disruptive and dominating behaviour, and lack of safety, trust and respect in other learning situations, which they attributed to the absence of class norms. In their notes, four students compared the process of learning in Women's Education to their experiences in other areas of TAFE. One student wrote: "[y]ou feel more equal … In WE [Women's Education] you have your own say and get listened to". Another contrasted her experiences in Women's Education with her other TAFE experiences:

> *[In Women's Ed one is] not lectured at [but] encouraged to participate and share, [it is] always positive. In [another program] it is just about what is being taught, students have their opinion and stay with that, and what is being taught. In W.E. [one is] not being lectured at, but having a conversation with [the lecturer].*

She implied that, in other areas of TAFE, students were reluctant to share opinions or discuss their responses freely, and that knowledge was imparted rather than students' being engaged through their personal experiences. Another student reflected that she had "gone through other education which was teacher delivering a lesson (listen and shut up). Whereas in W.E. [I] feel important in class — able to give opinion (encouraged) listened to". The following conversation between two students, as they discussed their experience in two different TAFE courses, reinforces the significance of class relationships in learning:

Student A: "compared with IVEC which lacked respect and focus, respect that all the classmates have for each other with no buzz over there and over there, when you are talking."

Student B: "comes from group norms, what is acceptable and what is not."

Student A: "Women's Ed students are more mature. Four of us went to IVEC, and we had students mucking around, and had to do something so we would say 'excuse me I can't hear what is being said'. It is definitely about respect. Community Services has good and bad lecturers, good lecturers were same as lecturers in Women's Ed, but bad lecturers said 'this is how it is going to be', and you couldn't negotiate. Smaller classes in Women's Ed, flowing discussion between students and lecturers. Group norms mean a woman is more free to speak up and participate and self-disclose."

Student B: "males kick up about homework or reading about women's issues in IVEC classes. That happened about three or four times".

Two students commented on the difference between their university experiences and their experiences in Women's Education. One woman disclosed:

I found it very odd. Introductions don't happen at uni. What is this crap (in W.Ed)? But it does lead to bonding. Little games worked, led to bonding with every one, which is important, talking to others outside of class, approaching people in class. What you got was what they really were (from intro). At uni, façade on the faces of students, extremely cold.

The other student noted: "[u]ni is structured for careers". Her notes make a link between the holistic approach taken in Women's Education and the fostering of informal kinds of learning besides the formal curriculum:

Pro-woman approach: very supportive of women's self-esteem in areas of study, speaking out, asking questions in class, proclaiming one's ignorance in any area of study. Informal atmosphere of classes like — communications, working in groups fostered much discussion and incidental learning which would not have occurred at uni.

When a student mentioned women-only classes as an important part of her learning process in Women's Education, there was an emphatic and unanimous insistence that this was an essential feature of the learning environment for these students. No other comment during the focus day produced such spontaneous and loud agreement. Students affirmed that women-only classes created the space for them to reflect and to speak about their lives, to take risks, to break silence, to make mistakes, and to be free from ridicule. Students described the significance of women-only classes in these comments:

Can't share in class about personal issues to do with being a woman, couldn't speak about rape if men were in the class. I opened out and aired a lot of laundry in Women's Ed classes because I could. I felt I really could. If I was in a mixed class I wouldn't have said anything.

Women-only is positive for learning. It wouldn't work with men.

[I] felt very comfortable with women — [I] could voice my opinion without being ridiculed.

Clearly, for these women to examine, explore, and share their own experience, to risk and experiment, to relate theoretical ideas to their lives and, in so doing, to achieve the objectives of the Women's Education curriculum, the presence of men in the classroom is a barrier to learning. Authoritarian teachers and disruptive classroom behaviour inhibit students' ability to take charge of or negotiate their own learning process, and restrict their learning opportunities.

Other pedagogical strategies

Further pedagogical practices that students identify as successful for their enhanced learning in Women's Education include: introductions, games, group work, rounds in which every student speaks, time to socialise, the fostering of respect and honesty, safety and non-judgement, as well as peer learning, and the dissolving of stereotypes.

Comments on assessment procedures were limited. Assessment procedures were described by one student as "fair, clear, flexible, non-threatening, and provided options". Another student suggested that assessment procedures were "flexible without compromising TAFE standards". One student was critical of "wavering deadlines", a comment that demonstrates that she felt confident to speak up about her concerns.

The diversity of strategies identified by the students and the emphasis on valuing the students would seem to support the argument that the lecturers have been mostly successful in putting their objectives into practice.

Hindrances to learning

Students were also asked what hindered their learning in Women's Education. Their responses were noticeably few, despite assurances that it was safe to be critical. Their discussion included: "inability to control outspoken students and stick to class norms", "unstructured classes", "fragmented teaching" and "lecturer needs to treat the class as the class wants to be treated". So for some students, those strategies that others cited as facilitating their learning — like an informal and diverse approach — have not been as effective, while other issues mentioned suggest that not all Women's Education classes reflect the feminist objectives of the program.

Their notes revealed more personal barriers to learning, such as their not owning a computer, and an injury to a child. Two students referred to behaviour problems in particular classes as personally distracting.

There was also some discussion about preliminary fears that Women's Studies modules would contain "man-bashing", which all students except one agreed was not their experience of studying Women's Studies. One student suggested that a Certificate IV student visit Certificate II's Introduction to Women's Studies class to reassure students that Women's Studies was not about "man-bashing".

In this discussion of hindrances, an emphasis on behaviour has emerged that reinforces the argument that class relationships affect learning. It also demonstrates the way in which students have come to recognise how social context influences their learning process. In addition, they seem to recognise that learning is a process with their suggested strategy for combating concerns about "man-bashing" by bringing different certificate–level students together.

The effects of studying Women's Education in a feminist learning environment

The effects were couched in terms of a changed sense of self-estimation and maturity, recognition of diversity and power in relationships, and shifts in social position.

Changed identity

Students expressed a changed sense of themselves as individuals, as women, and in their self-estimation. One 54-year-old student attributed a gain in her belief in herself, that she had failed to gain as she matured, to her learning in Women's Education. Another student talked of her discovery of her intelligence and a sense of normality: "I've got a brain now — so let's use it. Couldn't breathe around university students before. Now I realise I've got a brain and I am normal." Another student re-evaluated herself and her future: "I like who I have become. I am confident in myself and abilities, own direction and dreams". Some students claimed a feminist identity and an awareness of themselves as gendered agents of social change.

Relationships with others

Their exposure to new ideas, particularly feminist ideas, has affected their relationships in different ways, as their sense of power and position has shifted. Many referred to making new friends, but some to losing friends "through people's lack of understanding about W. Ed [Women's Education], and inability to accept how I have changed". Some spoke about improved relationships at home; for others, their learning strained relationships at home as women took time for themselves, or for studying, or began to speak of new ideas and different ways of viewing the world.

One effect of studying Women's Education is an increased and more tolerant collegiality among women. Students spoke of being more accepting of differences in others, of being more comfortable in or "really enjoying" women's company. One student said: "[I am] more protective of my rights and what demands I'll permit others to make"; another said: "I've become tolerant and more understanding and open and willing to share myself".

Changed power relations

Many of the students expressed the view that their learning had increased their power to act in relation to friends, work colleagues, and society:

> *... stand up for the rights of others when others put down ...*
>
> *Ability to stand up for rights and other women ...*
>
> *In my voluntary position, I'm not just behind the scene. I'm now outspoken. I'm proud and unafraid to call myself a feminist.*
>
> *... value of paid and unpaid work ... very quick to point out she is doing the valuable unpaid work.*

So, in addition to increased confidence and feelings of self-worth, these students articulated an increased awareness of social justice issues, how these issues affect their lives, and ways in which they act for social change.

Position in the family

Empowering changes in identity and power relations were reflected in the changed positions in the family of some students, changes that reveal students' increased sense of power and authority in relation to family members. Two students referred to using problem-solving strategies in family conflicts. Students described the following differences in their notes or in discussion:

> *More confidence to rock the boat rather than shut up for the sake of peace....*
>
> *... more contented, rest of family has to help and I don't feel guilty, sharing workload ...*
>
> *... family is positive and supportive. Do things differently in family life e.g. creates strategies, problem solving. Use these new skills all the time now. Able to delegate with family, ask people to do things for me without feeling guilty. If house work not done no guilt feelings anymore ...*
>
> *Preaching to other women there's more than just "mum" ...*
>
> *Children now help with family chores ...*

The students also demonstrated how they had come to view themselves as resources for ideas and knowledge of value, which they now had the confidence to offer to others. For instance, two students spoke about gaining the information from the program and passing it onto their sons in reference to both feminist and other skills and understandings. As one said, her learning had a "[p]ositive effect on son who has decided to keep studying like me". Another stated: "I am the first woman in 4 generations to be more than a wife and mother. My mother is 63 and thinking of doing Women's Ed".

Changed position in society

All students demonstrated a recognition of other roles for themselves outside of their families in paid work, volunteer work, or further study:

> *Opened up doors to improve my family standard of living due to being a springboard to further study and future paid employment ...*
>
> *Confident with further study especially essays and presentation. I can conquer the world more.*

Some commented on their previous confinement to a domestic role only and made the connection between their personal change and the need for social change in the position of women: "[l]ived in a shoe box most of my life. What happens to me a lot is to do with women's role in society. Shown abilities I didn't know I had, direction and skills, and opened up a lot of doors".

Conclusion

This paper has considered the issues and findings that we examined in our research into the Women's Education Program at TAFE SA. The project investigated what lecturers understood as feminist pedagogy and how they translated their philosophies into practice. The project also considered links between the lecturers' feminist pedagogy and what they understand literacy pedagogy to entail. The New London Group's idea of multiliteracies, in which literacy is conceived as social practice, was used as a starting point for examining any links.

The paper has also considered students' responses to our enquiries to gauge the effects of the pedagogical approaches used in Women's Education Program in TAFE SA. Students reflected on the value of feminist pedagogy in the program, including gains and achievements that they experienced, their understanding of learning as a process, and the impacts that this learning has had on their lives.

The research suggests that Women's Education lecturers are successful in achieving their feminist objectives, which can be summarised as using a women-centred approach to set up women-friendly learning environments, and to develop students' understanding of themselves as gendered social agents, each independently valued for her knowledge and encouraged to fulfill her potential by taking control of her learning process.

The data show that the lecturers also regard themselves as teachers of multiliteracies, where literacies are understood as those social practices and skills that enable students to "design their own social future". Such design may or may not include vocational objectives — that is, the scope of such design goes beyond students' skilling themselves for work.

Many of the strategies that the lecturers described to achieve their pedagogical objectives coincide as both feminist- and literacy-oriented. These include the establishment of supportive environments of trust and respect, in which active listening and tolerance of diversity are highly valued. To encourage such an environment, lecturers negotiate class norms with students and encourage students to take responsibility for reinforcing these norms, as well as for their learning process. In addition, lecturers de-centre their own authority and encourage collaboration among students through group work, to assist students

to see themselves and each other as valuable resources and alternative authorities. This kind of student-centred approach underpins both feminist and literacy pedagogies.

The research shows that the Women's Education Program is highly valued by students who describe a feminist classroom environment, feminist teaching practices, and a women-centred curriculum, as significant supports to their learning process. The students indicated that they value the Women's Studies modules as an opportunity for understanding women's changing and diverse roles and positions in society, and for developing a recognition of their own social practices as gendered agents with the potential for engaging in social change. The students cited examples of their changed sense of identity and self-worth as evidence for the value of learning in the program. Many exhibited an understanding of the social contexts in which they act as subjects, and how their learning has influenced their relationships and standing. These data attest to the program's objective of going beyond vocational goals by encouraging an holistic approach to students' learning and by developing students' understanding of learning as a process of which they can take control, including setting self-determined goals and negotiating the pace of learning.

In particular, women-only classes are deemed an essential characteristic of the Women's Education Program by both lecturers and students. Women experience problems with power, safety and disclosure in mixed classes, where dominant male behaviour and male resentment of studying materials that relate to women's roles and positions in society present barriers to women's learning. Women also value the opportunity to speak freely of personal experience. The research shows that the students recognise this opportunity as important in their learning process; they do not and will not speak as freely in mixed classes where they fear ridicule and, instead, adopt silence. Provision of women-only spaces in pre-vocational education supports a pedagogical process that is highly successful for women's pre-vocational learning.

To support the program further in its objectives, we suggest that the development of more connection with CPE and IVEC programs would foster a fruitful exchange of understandings about teaching of multiliteracies and classroom practices employed in these different TAFE programs. Such an approach would also strengthen the pedagogical links that this research project has demonstrated. The flexibility of administrative arrangements should also be recognised and encouraged to allow women students to cross programs according to their needs.

We would argue that the Women's Education Program can be demonstrated as a multiliteracies program based on feminist pedagogical principles, with an emphasis on critical literacy, learning to learn, communication, computer and study skills. The Women's Education Program works from the perspective that the individual is a gendered subject capable of effecting social change and of taking control of her learning.

It is highly commendable that TAFE SA recognises this approach and continues to promote and support this unique program. During 25 years of

operation, it has enabled more than a thousand women to realise their potential, take charge of their lives, and become active agents in the designing of their social futures.

Notes

1. This project was sponsored by the Spencer Foundation through provision of a practitioner research mentoring and communication grant administered by the University of South Australia. The Adelaide Institute of TAFE also supported the research.
2. The period of 1880–1914 is known as the time of first wave feminism (Spearritt in Saunders & Evans 1992: 325–427).3 This topic was not to be discussed on the day because we wanted to focus on feminist practice and possible intersections with literacy pedagogies. Nevertheless, we wanted participants to be able to articulate it for themselves.
3. Unfortunately, the web site from which this transcript was downloaded is no longer active so cannot be accessed directly. The transcript can still be accessed, however, by going through the Minnesota State University web site http://www.mankato.msus.edu and searching for "feminist pedagogy". This search accesses the Women's Studies Program and its staff, which enables access to Carolyn Shrewsbury's web sites. She includes the transcript under 97–98 courses.
4. For challenges to the discursive use of "literacy", see Betty-Anne Francis, Francis Ennis and Tannis Atkinson (1994b), *Women in Literacy Speak,* in which the voices of women deemed "illiterate" explain their positions. Horsman (1999), in *Too Scared to Learn,* also challenges the discourse by examining the effects of violence on women's decisions about their learning and what developing literacy skills means for them.
5. These benefits are from Goleman (1996), who cites a W T Consortium program that was adapted for American secondary schools (see Solity 1999b, 8).

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Women at Play: Finding their voices through writing for performance

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This paper reports on a piece of action research undertaken in the Women's Education Program at Adelaide Institute of TAFE. The project explored the question of whether teaching women to write dramatic monologue helps them to develop multiliteracies and to cope with life transitions. The research tracked the progress of the women's development of both creative writing and critical literacy skills in their interactions during structured group feedback sessions, through their writing, and through rehearsal and performance of their work. The paper includes reflections on the pedagogical implications of drawing on everyday life experiences as the basis for encouraging participation in social change.

Introduction

When Gertrude Stein was dying, she asked her lifelong partner, Alice B. Toklas, "What is the answer?" Alice did not have the answer so the irrepressible Gertrude asked, "In that case, what is the question?" (Toklas 1963, cited in Souhami 1993: 348).

My research project, "Women at Play: Finding their voices through writing for performance", was based around the theme of multiple literacies and life transitions, as proposed by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) South Australia, in association with the University of South Australia. This project, like Alice, has not tried to provide definite answers since it was undertaken without firm ideas about specific outcomes; in fact, the women who engaged in this project called themselves "pioneers". Rather, the project was a piece of action research in which the process of teaching was as important as the "products".

Background

In term one of 2000, I taught descriptive and narrative aspects of writing in an elective literacy module within the Women's Education Program at Adelaide Institute of TAFE. Many of the women in the class expressed their enjoyment of this module and it seemed to me that they benefited particularly from group activity in deconstructing well-known fairy tales. I considered that it would be very exciting to build on the benefits of the interactive component of this class in term two. Most of the women who enrolled in term two continued from term

one; a few did not and a few were new. In particular, I wanted to exploit the group's ability to collaborate in exercises that extended their imaginative and critical faculties.

I decided to introduce the "new" class in term two to the dramatic genres of dialogue and monologue. As a practising writer and playwright, I wanted particularly to demystify the notion of creativity by encouraging the women to create their own monologues and dialogues, thus illustrating the difference between straight narrative accounts and dramatic monologue and dialogue. Furthermore, I wanted to introduce them to the idea that language is not neutral, but is rather the medium whereby a plurality of values is transmitted by a plurality of voices. What better way of illustrating this than by employing dramatic monologue?

This "Writing for Drama" subject was taught in term two as an elective module in the Women's Education Program, and comprised nine two-hour sessions. By the end of these nine sessions, every one of the women who had remained in the course had written a monologue, and all but one, who was absent at the last session, performed their monologues in front of the rest of the class. Their performances were recorded on amateur video.

The women also produced two dialogues which were the products of two group efforts. The dialogues were less successful than the monologues, however, which posed the interesting question of why this was so. I concluded that the main reason underlying the less successful work of the women was that they had not exploited their life experiences in the process of writing, and had not transmuted them into their creative work. I therefore made changes to the subsequent subject, "Writing for Drama II", which I taught in terms three and four.

Writing for Drama II

The subject, Writing for Drama II, was conducted in terms three and four, and provided the substance for my action research project. The project explored the following question: can teaching women to write dramatic monologues help them to cope with multiple literacies and life transitions? The work of term two and the issues it raised directed my approach.

I decided that the women would continue their work on monologues, but this time they would use a very structured method adapted from the work of Mike Leigh, an internationally recognised British playwright and filmmaker. I was interested in Mike Leigh's theory that truth relating to character lies in concrete detail taken from the lives of ordinary people (Clements 1986, 22). I wished to test my idea that the work of the women would gain in quality if they could be persuaded to draw upon their own life experiences (including the life experiences of someone they knew well) as a basis for their creative, imaginative work.

This paper describes the process through which the women developed their monologues as well as a range of critical literacy skills. I first discuss the stages of the process that the students undertook and the kind of research

material I collected. I briefly profile the women, including their life contexts, which affected their participation in various ways. I then consider the idea of "multiliteracies" as a pedagogical approach, based on the work of the New London Group (1995), and how this approach informed my thinking when undertaking this action research, as well as my teaching practice. The three stages of this approach structure my discussion of the women's journey in creative writing and the development of their critical literacy skills. Finally, I consider the extent to which the evolution of this project embodied the aim of assisting the women to be active designers — makers of their social futures — as well as some of the pedagogical implications for future courses of this nature.

The stages and methods of the project

The project tracked the women's development, both in their creative writing and in their critical literacy skills, during a series of structured group feedback sessions, as well as through their monologues, journals, questionnaires, a focus day and, finally, the rehearsal and performance of their work. I used particular exercises at different stages, which I outline below. The process provided me with a range of written and recorded material, as well as my experiences with the group on which to reflect during the project. To this end, I also kept my own reflective journal in which I considered the aims of the subject and the project, and noted useful strategies and ideas for changes to future subjects of a similar nature.

I encouraged the women to draw on their life experiences to assist their writing process, by introducing them to the following principles:

- drama involves action and conflict
- action and conflict proceed from motivation
- motivation proceeds from character.

As a first and vital step, the women were encouraged to get to know their characters (Clements 1986: 25). I suggested that the women choose someone they knew on which to base their final character, in the hope that the real people who were being researched would provide the women with much more concrete detail than they had used in term two. Some of the women discussed their characterisations with their real-life models; circumstances prevented others from doing so, and some chose not to. How the women felt about their choices and the effects of their decisions on the nature of their monologues will be considered later in this paper. From the very beginning, the women were encouraged to draw on their life experiences and to make decisions about the directions in which they wanted to go with their writing.

Thereafter, each woman compiled an outline of her "true-to-life" character, using 48 headings, such as her character's favourite colour, the thing that her character feared most, whether or not her character found it easy to get up in the morning and so on. The aim of this exercise was to encourage the women to make their character as *vivid* as possible (Clements 1986: 31). The questions that the women had to ask themselves provided a basis or an outline and, during

class, the women were encouraged to ask each other further questions to flesh out each other's characters. As a result of these exercises, the women began to get involved in analysing, posing appropriate questions to themselves and others, and critical listening — all important critical literacy skills.

I then asked each woman to write a "day in the life" account of her "true-to-life" character, but in the third person, to distance the writers from their real-life models. At this stage, I wanted to introduce an element of objectivity since the real-life subjects were not intended to be the end products of the women's characters, but only to form the basis of them. I wanted to give them room to allow their imaginations to play their part (Clements 1986: 32). Equally important was the deepening in the complexity of each participant's character by having to take each character through a whole day. The discussions that arose from these accounts were very lively and gave the women practice in critical listening, oracy, and editing of their material as a result of these accounts. These stages also encouraged confidence in the women to take control of their writing by taking responsibility for their characterisation.

This collaborative work led to suggestions among members of the group about situations that could form the basis of each character's monologue. In addition, throughout this project, I employed the dramatic monologues of playwright Alan Bennett's *The Complete "Talking Heads"* video series (1999) to expose the women to models of monologues, and to give them practice in textual criticism. Both Bennett and the aforementioned Leigh are artists who are vitally concerned with issues of class and powerlessness, or voicelessness. Alan Bennett is a master of the use of subtext — that is, the implicit themes and motivations that layer meaning in writing. Both of these artists take as their raw material the stuff of ordinary lives, banal little incidents, to create works of great power and artistic truth.

The women then wrote their monologues, which were critically examined by the group and by me. These group feedback sessions were aimed at encouraging the women to be as specific as possible about what they were actually saying and how to develop these themes in monologue form. They drew on their critical analysing and listening skills to provide constructive feedback to each other within the negotiated parameters of the group.

All of these stages culminated in the final stage, namely, the performance. I had informed the women early in term three that they had been invited to perform their monologues at a Women's Education graduation ceremony in mid-December. Since the whole tenor of this work in terms three and four was much more concentrated and focused on the nature of dramatic monologue, I employed the services of a professional film director and a professional actor towards the end of term four to add an extra dimension to the learning experience of the women.[1] In particular, their association with the director exposed them to the issue of subtext in their own monologues. Furthermore, this stage of the course underlined for the women the fact that they were engaged in a process — a dynamic activity. They were expected to keep amending their texts to suit the particular requirements of performance. The exposure of the

women to these professionals added a reality to their activity, and gave them an added incentive not only to write their monologues for performance, but to perform their second monologues themselves. Six women had their second monologues performed in public. Of these six women, four performed their own work and two of the monologues were performed by a professional actor. One of the intended outcomes of the project had been fulfilled — specifically, to write and perform monologues for public performance.

Profile of the participants

Since the women were being encouraged to draw on their life experiences, it is important to know something of the women themselves and their life contexts which affected their creative process, as well as their social futures. I have changed their names in this account, however, to protect their identities.

Of the 11 women who initially attended Writing for Drama II in terms three and four, six stayed the course, and each wrote a monologue that was performed publicly. There were a number of withdrawals from the project for a variety of reasons, which included personal tensions (I shall refer to this matter in greater detail later in the paper), employment opportunities, and family commitments. In addition, the poor health and family commitments of one participant meant that her attendance was almost non-existent. Although she did produce a monologue, it was not performed because she was unable to attend a sufficient number of sessions to engage in the learning process, and to contribute in any significant manner to the active learning of the group. Her example demonstrates the extent to which the exigencies of life can impinge on the writing process. While her monologue is still valuable, I believe it is important for students to be able to experience the feedback gained in the environment of a group, built on mutual trust over time.

The number of enrolments in Writing for Drama II during terms three and four was also heavily influenced by the status of this subject. Uncertainty about the availability of finance meant that it was not until well into term four that the participants could be assured of obtaining any credit for their attendance and participation. Consequently, it required an amazing degree of commitment and dedication on the part of the women to keep attending without any firm promise of concrete reward, and in the face of demands from other aspects of their lives. And so why did this small band of six women keep attending? The most common response was that it was fun:

> *It's got to be fun. If it's not fun, you're not going to get the commitment. ("Erica": focus group audiotape transcript)*
> *... this is my pleasure time. ("Gwen": focus group audiotape transcript)*
> *It was something new. It was terrific for me ... It was exciting. ("Petra": focus group audiotape transcript)*
> *... it's more of a fun learning concept, isn't it? ("Helen": focus group audiotape transcript)*

These responses suggest the close relationships that developed and the benefits of the group's interactions during structured feedback sessions as they

progressed on their writing journey.

Although small, this group was very diverse. Their ages ranged from mid-thirties to mid-fifties. One came from a non-English speaking background, one was Welsh. One had spent a considerable period of her life in Darwin, whereas another had been brought up in a seaside country town in South Australia. One suffered from a most debilitating disease, but it only served to intensify her commitment to the subject. In fact, most of the women were suffering varying degrees of emotional stress, either because of problems with ex-partners, or because of economic circumstances. None of the women was living with a partner. Four of the six women had children, and each of these four women had a child living with them. One woman was living with her elderly parents. All of the women were living in far from affluent financial circumstances. The most powerful bond among all of these women, however, was positive and dynamic — they were undergoing life transitions.

Writing for performance, multiliteracies and life transitions

All of these women wanted to be active participants in social change, to be active designers — makers of their social futures. Consequently, by engaging them in writing for performance, I hoped to demonstrate that all of these women were involved in a pedagogy of multiliteracies to change their lives for the better (Kress 2000: 141). By "pedagogy of multiliteracies", I mean that the women were not just taking in information and learning skills in a narrow competency-based framework, but were drawing on their life experiences in their writing, and developing critical literacy skills in the process, in order to shift their lives in ways that were self-directed (see also New London Group 1995).

The theoretical considerations that led me to choose writing for performance as a means of educating these women in multiliteracies, and thus helping them achieve some life transitions, relate to the work of the New London Group. The work of this group has focused on the changing demands that are being placed upon people as "makers of meaning" in the workplace, in public life, and in the community, during a time of unprecedented technological and cultural change. This rapid change has entailed a re-conception of literacy and of the ways that we make meaning. Since meaning is made in ways that have become multi-modal, literacy has become multimodal, encompassing a range of written, audio and spatial patterns of meaning.

The New London Group (1995) suggests three aspects of "meaning-as-design" around which I structured the stages of the project, in an attempt to encourage the women to remould the raw material of their life experiences as the basis of their creative products or "'designed' artefacts". I have also used these three aspects in the structure of this paper:

- the designed, which includes the available meaning-making resources, patterns and conventions of meaning in a particular cultural context;

- the designing, which involves the process of shaping emergent meaning — through reading, seeing, speaking and listening; this process involves representation, recontextualisation and the transformation of the available resources of meaning;
- the redesigned, which involves the outcome of designing something through which the meaning-makers have remade themselves and designed their social futures (New London Group 1995).

By immersing themselves in the process of writing monologues, the women were grappling in a self-reflexive and self-consciously creative way with issues of identity, which, in this world of "new capitalism" (Gee 2000: 61) plays an ever increasingly important role in people's lives. Gee (2000) argues that people can no longer expect to remain in a fixed location in a social hierarchy, because new technologies and globalisation have flattened those hierarchies. Not only do people take on a wider range of roles, "new capitalism" requires them to be more self-conscious about what they can offer, since interaction is both more direct and more fragmented (Gee 2000). You are, in a sense, your own portfolio.

Women are adept at assuming so many identities. They perform so many roles in their daily lives — mothers, workers, siblings, bosses, students. They are often required to be listeners and observers. They are also often called upon to collaborate and negotiate. In short, they continually demonstrate the very skills that are required in the flattened hierarchy of "new capitalism" (Gee 2000: 45).

By asking the participants in this project to write monologues for ultimate performance, I hoped to be able to allow these women to exploit their experience in a self-consciously creative way, in the hope that they would realise that creative writing lies within all of us. That it is just another muscle that needs exercising. I adopted this approach as much from the point of view of a practising artist, as from that of an orthodox literacy teacher. Indeed, the project could have been subtitled, "Literacy happens when you're doing something else", because I wanted to take the pedagogical emphasis away from the present rage for outcomes based on specific competencies of an instrumental nature. I wanted to teach in a way that allowed the women to master skills such as oracy, critical listening and reading, to become computer literate and to learn skills of teamwork in the process of engaging in a pleasurable and intellectually stimulating writing activity. The kinds of literacy skills that the women acquired as a result of this process allowed them to make sense of their life transitions in a more holistic fashion, than if those skills had been linked only to employment opportunities. While recognising the importance of assessing competency, I wanted the passion and involvement of the women in their creative writing activity to form the basis of their acquiring skills as part of becoming multiliterate — by grasping their available resources to redesign and transform their lives as they saw fit.

The women's journey

The emphasis in this project has always been on process, and so it is pertinent to examine the journey of these women towards their main outcome, and to consider how far their journey embodied and reflected the three stages involved in this process of becoming multiliterate — namely, the designed, the designing and the redesigned.

The designed

Using life experiences in writing

The suggestion that the women base their characters on someone they knew proved problematical for some of the participants. As new writers, it was helpful for them to write about what they knew, but the familiarity made it hard at times for the women to distance themselves from their characters, and brought up issues of how to deal with the emotions that the process provoked. These emotions, cathartic at times, prompted development in the women's literacy skills, because they had to try to focus on the writing process. So while the characterisations and feedback discussions often involved emotional issues, which sometimes caused writing blocks, the women were able to use the emotion to explore their creative writing and to assist development of their critical literacy.

Confidentiality and loyalty

"Katherine" based her character on her beloved grandmother who had recently died. She felt, however, that it was important to obtain permission from her family due to a concern about loyalty to the memory of a loved one. She felt she could proceed only after she had received that permission, a decision that required discussion and negotiation with her family. Even then, once permission had been given, the family was concerned that a sensitive family matter should not be divulged.

Katherine's choice of subject could have posed problems of confidentiality, which could have prevented her from writing. There were implications arising from her choice that she might not have thought through initially, but which her moral position required her to consider. This is the sort of issue that affects the writing process when it is based on life experiences, because it relates directly to the specific life context of the writer and her decisions. Katherine's decisions about how to proceed were also connected to her relationships with her family, including the family member on whom she based her character. Her critical literacy thus was developing as a consequence of her drawing on her life experiences, while the choices she made, based on these experiences, influenced both her writing and her relationships with her family.

Personal identification

Four of the six women who presented their monologues were very personally involved with their characters. Two of the four, "Marie" and Petra, based their characters on themselves. Of the other two, one, Katherine, based her character on a deceased family member, and the other based her character on the mother of her best childhood friend. The remaining two women, Erica and Gwen, were heavily influenced by an amalgam of real-life people in creating their characters.

Petra, for example, could not separate herself sufficiently from her monologue character, which she considered was "too bitchy" and, consequently, she exhibited considerable unease. This is an obvious pitfall for anyone wanting to use themselves as basic material for their imaginative work. Petra's monologue was very successful, but her unease illustrated a flaw in my method, since I was unable to convince Petra that she herself was only the basis of her monologue character.

Helen, on the other hand, expressed discomfort at overt shows of emotion. She made an abortive attempt to base her character upon her childhood friend, but she decided instead, after considerable discussion with the group and with me, to base her character upon her friend's mother whom she called "Glory". It is significant that although the main character in her monologue was her childhood friend's mother, she was really talking about herself since the emotional content of the monologue concerns her rebellious behaviour as a child.

Gwen claimed that her character was entirely fictitious in contrast to her previous monologue, which had been based entirely on her daughter. Despite Gwen's initial assertion that her character for her second monologue was based on "the typical Welsh female's personality", it was also, as she admitted, considerably influenced by her immersion in the life story and habits of a friend's mother. Gwen was able to create a character that was an amalgam of the factual and the imaginary. This character, however, was also heavily influenced by the very strong emotional circumstances surrounding Gwen as a sole parent and survivor of two marriages.

It is interesting to note that the initial resistance Gwen felt towards writing about her character in the third person because she felt that she would be unable to "get under her skin", soon evaporated, and she became obsessed with her character. She even described her underwear in her "day in the life" of her character.

> *I really got into her knickers [laughter from participants] ... the knickers she was wearin' that day ... I dreamt her ... she walked beside me ... actually I ended up walkin' beside her — she got that strong and when I was in the kitchen and the way she'd put the kettle on ...*
>
> (Gwen: focus group audiotape transcript)

Dealing with bereavement

In all instances, the closeness of the women to their subject matter raised highly emotive issues, particularly in dealing with bereavement. For example, the research upon which Katherine embarked was, for her, a very emotional journey into past experiences. To provide the basis for her character, she obtained a copy of her grandmother's autobiographical monograph, and of the eulogy spoken at her funeral. During her reading of these documents to the group, Katherine was moved to tears, since not only was she revisiting the bereavement of her grandmother, she was also having to deal with her father's death.

Representing close relationships

Dealing with the living could be just as difficult. Marie, who had given a very full account of her father upon whom her character was to be based, found herself blocked when it came to writing a monologue. Were there issues surrounding her relationship with him that she found difficult to face? Marie solved her problem by basing her character on herself as did Petra.

Emotion in feedback sessions

The emotional nature of the interactions among members of the group also had to be negotiated during the feedback sessions. For example, Erica based her character on an amalgam of five women whom she knew. Erica's constant cheerfulness and positive outlook in the face of a most debilitating and life-threatening disease, stirred up strong feelings in her in one session, since her monologue character was criticised for being too good to be true! That is, her personal outlook on life had influenced her writing to the extent that the others did not believe her characterisation to be realistic. Such feedback represented personal comment on Erica's approach to life, as well as on her writing, and could have endangered the trust Erica had in dealing with the group. It took considerable courage for Erica to accept this criticism, since she could not personally give in to negativity given the state of her health. During one group session, Erica confronted very painful childhood memories of being bullied; this helped her to develop other dimensions of light and shade in her monologue character. This confrontation again required considerable bravery on her part. As a result of the social relations of trust and collaboration that had been built up among members of the group, and her commitment to using her life experiences, Erica transformed a particularly painful encounter into a piece of creative writing. Her literacy skills also developed quickly during the feedback sessions as a consequence of her commitment.

All of these women were working with the designed. In other words, they were drawing upon the knowledge and experience of their own life worlds. This raw stuff of life became the material that they redesigned to fashion a meaning that was relevant to them through their monologues. In all instances in which

emotional issues arose, I resisted becoming a counsellor and encouraged the women to work through the issues in their writing, to focus on the process, and, if the writing block was too severe, to try another approach or character — the main thing was to keep going.

Structured sessions and negotiated rules of interaction ensured that the feedback sessions remained a safe and supportive environment for the women to explore their transitions. After an outburst by one student, who subsequently left the group due to emotional conflict, one of the women suggested a time-out rule, be instigated to ensure high emotions did not destroy the closeness of the group sessions. The group adopted the rule but it was never required because of the social relationships of trust that had developed among the women.

The designing

According to the New London Group (1995), designing refers to the process of shaping and transforming available resources of meaning through reading, speaking, observing and listening. The women developed many skills through the process of collaborative criticism of each other's work. Choosing characters, and then fleshing them out, involved decision-making and, in some cases, negotiation with real-life subjects or with family for permission, or for reassurance, that confidential matters would be treated sensitively. Talking through characterisations with the other women, with me, and with their real-life models, improved the women's overall oracy and critical listening, as did their negotiation of the group dynamics. The women had to edit their writing based on their feedback sessions, and make writing decisions based on the dramatic nature of the genre. Their writing also involved learning new technologies, like word processing and accessing the Internet.

Improvement in oracy

Katherine was able to obtain credit for a public speaking module within the Women's Education curriculum, on the basis of her delivering a marvellously comprehensive and wryly humorous account of the work of this subject at the Women's Education graduation ceremony on 15 December 2000. For most people, standing up in front of strangers and delivering a speech is daunting; Katherine actually volunteered to write and deliver this speech, which demonstrates her increased confidence.

Evidence of the development of oracy is found in the observations of the women themselves:

> *Petra had her turn to read out her character which was based on herself. She had to talk about herself in third [sic] person. I love listening to her speak and her language is improving each time.*
>
> (Katherine's journal)

Development of computer skills

Gwen's monologue centred around a woman's memory of a tragic incident in a Welsh village and, although she was not conversant with the Internet, her enthusiasm for her project enabled her to overcome her initial diffidence and to develop her computer skills.

> *People would give me criticism and I just couldn't wait to get out the class to get on my computer and say, "Yes, I can see where that's coming from", and changing a few bits.*
>
> (Gwen: focus group audiotape transcript)

This is an example of how the women's close involvement in an enjoyable task that related to their lives, assisted the development of their critical and social literacy skills.

Development of critical listening and reading skills

Members of the group found it very easy to use each other as a critical sounding board for their work. This was particularly valuable for those students who had problems grappling with the dramatic format of the monologue. For instance, although Erica identified herself as not a "natural monologue" type, she quickly acknowledged the support of the group in pointing out the need to use detail to further the dramatic action of the monologue, rather than to function as mere padding: "The advice of the other students was helpful in clarifying this for me" (Erica's journal). The collaborative nature of the group made the feedback sessions constructive and assisted the writing process.

Some of the women found it difficult to escape from the narrative genre and get to grips with dramatic monologue:

> *Um. I got bogged down in the narrative ... (Helen: focus group audiotape transcript)*
>
> *I had so much information I didn't know where to start or how to [make/work] it in the past, the present ...*
>
> (Katherine: focus group audiotape transcript)

All members of the group benefited enormously from exposure to the BBC videotapes of Alan Bennett's The Complete "Talking Heads" (1999). A considerable part of the Writing for Drama II module was spent critically analysing the monologues and the written scripts of this series. My modelling of the specific genre of dramatic monologue, especially through the audiovisual medium, was critical in helping the women to understand the nature of the genre, as is evidenced by the comments of the women themselves:

> *Watching the video helped a lot.*
>
> (Katherine: focus group audiotape transcript)

> *I did get bogged down initially in it being a narrative, um, and it wasn't again until I saw "Talking heads" um yeah I could find a couple of situations and then develop.*
>
> (Helen: focus group audiotape transcript)

> *The "Talking heads" videos were absolutely brillliant ... Yeah, just watching a couple and goin' off and doing your own and then it was good to watch another couple because you needed reinforcement again ...*
>
> (Gwen: focus group audiotape transcript)

In these audiovisual sessions, I emphasised the writing, not the acting, and what is implied in the subtext, which leads the audience to use their imagination to move from scene to scene. These sessions encouraged the women to explore the use of understatement and association rather than explanation in their monologues and to look at how they structured their shifts from scene to scene.

Development of editing skills

One of the most important factors in helping the women to develop editing skills was undoubtedly the contribution of the director, Margaret Haselgrove, and the professional actor, Anna Linarello. This aspect of the project helped to expose the women to the dramatic reality of the monologue genre. In other words, a dramatic monologue is meant to be acted in front of an audience. Consequently, the women were exposed to the requirement by the director to change their monologues in order to suit the requirements of *performance*. For example, some monologues had to be shortened. Evidence of the progress made by the women in their handling of their material is shown by Katherine's comment: "I went up to the computer and opened it up and then just cut things out. In about fifteen minutes" (Katherine: focus group audiotape transcript).

Development of an understanding of subtext in the context of dramatic writing

The director's emphasis on the women's analysing their monologues for the subtext brought an added dimension to the women's skills. Some of them discovered aspects of their material that they did not always find comforting or comfortable. The response of the women to this aspect of the project may be summed up by one of the participants: "I simply loved having the director with us because it brought the writing to life" (Gwen: focus group audiotape transcript).

The redesigned

It remains to assess whether the women managed to transform the raw material of their accounts into dramatic monologues, and whether they went some of the way to being true designers of their social futures by using a new meaning-making resource to remake themselves.

The high quality of the women's monologues provides eloquent proof of their ability to transform the raw material of their lives into dramatic monologues. How much the women have improved in their understanding of and working within the genre is evident from a comparison of these monologues

with their first monologues that were written in term two. The later monologues show evidence of greater complexity and a greater diversity of mood and texture.

The most important improvement in the final monologues was the degree of sophistication in the women's dealing with the genre, and their commitment to the writing process. Although I looked at the writing at various stages and made some corrections to grammar and punctuation, considerable credit must be given to the critical listening and writing sessions to which each member of the group exposed herself, to the collective feedback of the group, and its influence on the women's social and critical literacy:

> *Writing, presenting, getting up, talking to the group and having people honestly give their opinions and suggestions then going back and redoing it and having to submit it endless times. (Helen: focus group audiotape transcript)*

> *I really enjoyed the way everybody got involved with the development of each other's characters by asking for further information about the character other than what was presented by the basic questions.*
>
> (Marie's journal)

How much the women *themselves* recognised their ability to exploit this medium, was shown in their own assessment of their progress:

> *I can definitely write a monologue and I can definitely tap into my imagination now which is ... I just really didn't realise I had that imagination.*
>
> (Gwen: focus group audiotape transcript)

> *It seemed to happen with you, like in one or two weeks because you were writing and not quite gettin' the gist and all of a sudden, you were there with your mobile phone, givin' her hell. Yeah, you amazed me.*
>
> (Gwen talking to Petra, a non–English speaking background participant: focus group audiotape transcript)

> *I surprised myself too.*
>
> (Petra on her second monologue: focus group audiotape transcript)

> *That I have the ability to do it! The sense of achievement ...*
>
> (Helen: focus group audiotape transcript)

> *... it certainly helped my public speaking skills ... To me that helped a heck of a lot because it made me realise that I'm quite capable of doing 90% of what I set out to do.*
>
> (Erica: focus group audiotape transcript)

> *The second monologue was harder. I had to dig deeper. I had to change focus on the character.*
>
> (Helen: focus group audiotape transcript)

Helen, who initially thought the first monologue was easier to do and therefore more enjoyable, subsequently viewed herself again in the first amateur video and compared her performance with her performance in the second video. She was able to see her improvement and so she reconsidered her views.

Katherine's monologue was performed at the graduation ceremony by a professional actor. Katherine's ability to transform her account of her beloved grandmother into a moving monologue was proved by Katherine's sister's tears as she watched the actor take on the personality of their grandmother.

The women undoubtedly managed to transform the raw material of their life experiences into effective dramatic monologues and, along the way, made considerable improvement in their critical literacy skills, the significance of which they recognised for themselves. But did this project help the women to go some of the way to designing their social futures?

The following examples, I believe, provide sufficient evidence of the project's success in this matter. Gwen has indicated to me that she is determined to pursue her love of drama, whether as an actor or a writer, or both, either in a professional or amateur capacity. Her personal life has improved since she has found that her work in this course has helped her to view her life's problems with greater objectivity. Katherine has told me that she has already enrolled in a new computer studies course prompted by her new-found confidence gained in Writing for Drama II.

Almost without exception, the main element of change in these women's lives has been their realisation that they possess creativity and imagination:

> *I just really didn't realise I had that imagination. And I can detach myself from myself and put myself in someone else's shoes if I want to which is quite fun. It's great.*
>
> (Gwen: focus group audiotape transcript)

> *I have the ability to use imagination.*
>
> (Katherine: focus group audiotape transcript)

The pedagogical implications posed by this project

There are a number of pedagogical implications to emerge from the project. I have distilled these from the overall process of the action research, but they are informed by my reflections on the subject, which I recorded in my own journal. Some relate to the structure of the process and the resources used, some relate to the way the social relationships in the group were encouraged along certain lines, and some relate to framing issues associated with the process, such as the approach and timing.

I believe that the project has shown the importance of a carefully structured course that allows the women to develop their writing over time — a minimum of two terms. The participants were exposed, step by step, to the various stages of writing and performance. This strategy allowed the women to develop both the confidence and the skills to develop several monologues. The

improvement in their monologues is attested by the women themselves:

> *... for the lot of us as a group to be told um — everyone — two terms ago that is what they were going to do you would have walked out and said "You've got to be joking. I'm not going to even try."*
>
> (Helen: focus group audiotape transcript)

Sufficient time is also needed to develop close relationships among the group, and to build up and maintain the necessary trust for the feedback sessions to be effective and transformative.

The group also felt strongly that any future group should have resources, like audiovisual examples of the genre, early on in the course. They indicated that they found the resources that I used — for example, *The Complete "Talking Heads"* video series — helped them to understand the writing process and the use of subtext better. Mike Leigh's work also helped them to understand ways of drawing on everyday experience in their writing. The audiovisual records of their own monologue performances enabled the women to see their progress, and to understand the process of writing for a specific purpose and audience, namely for performance.

Another important pedagogical strategy was maintaining good humour within the group and finding a way for the group to protect itself against destructive outbursts of emotion. This project was immensely enjoyable but it was also quite stressful sometimes, both for the participants and for me, since the material on which the women were working was very emotive at times. Early in the course, after one strong outburst of emotion from a student who subsequently left the course, we instituted the time-out rule, whereby any member could indicate the need for time out if she considered matters were becoming difficult to handle. In the event, we did not need to use this process. The highly sensitive nature of the material and, consequently, the importance of maintaining good humour, were illustrated by the following remark:

> *if we weren't having fun um because you really open yourself up quite a lot, um and it could be quite threatening if it did lose that lightness.*
>
> (Helen: focus group audiotape transcript)

One of the most important dimensions of the project has been to explore the approach of multiliteracies and the use of life experience as material relevant to the writing process. I believe that this action research demonstrates that critical reading, critical listening, public speaking, and computer skills can be taught in an imaginative and enjoyable manner, using creative imagination to embody their development. If participants are allowed to engage in a meaningful journey of educational discovery, the outcomes will, in a sense, look after themselves. As evidence of this, the women in this project were given a formal qualification for their work. The Women's Education Program credited them for a unit that they called "Everyday Writing II".

The project has also compelled me to examine some of my own assumptions about the writing process, the way I structured the stages, and the needs of a subject like this, based on a pedagogy of multiliteracies. For example,

it became clear after one potentially destructive encounter in the feedback sessions, namely the outburst from the departing student, that group interactions need clear but negotiated parameters to ensure that the feedback maintains a sense of collaboration.

Also, I had to consider some language issues involved with students, like Petra, who was from a non–English speaking background. In Petra's case, her language skills were an obstacle to her fully understanding the separation of writer from character. More simple direction, or just more direction, on how to create this distinction might be necessary in a similar situation in the future.

Conclusion

This project taught me more than I think I imparted to the participants, and that, to me, is the acid test of any course that has pretensions of an educational nature, because it allows for growth and development. The value of drawing on the women's own life experiences in the writing process has, I think, demonstrated the significance of a pedagogy of multiliteracies in assisting these women to become the designers — makers of their social futures.

The achievements of the participants in many areas of literacy, as described in this paper, illustrate the effectiveness of running courses that do not concentrate upon specific outcomes, but, instead, seek to develop creativity in a way that ensures that specific skills will be developed along the way. This project also taught me to place less emphasis upon control, and place more trust in the responses of my students, so that my teaching can involve a proper dialogue between my students and me.

I was privileged to have had the opportunity to work with a group of remarkable women. I think, therefore, that it is appropriate that one of them should have the last word in summarising their experience of this project: "It helped me to acknowledge the diamond within ..." (Erica's journal).

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Above all, I should like to thank not only the women who participated in this project, but all the women who participated in my Women's Education classes last year, and who inspired me to pursue this project.

Note

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Research and Practice: Unsettling a troublesome binary

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An increasing number of practitioner research projects undertaken using small-scale grants in Australia have documented how adults learn literacy in community, workplace and public/private sector training settings. Less is known about the assistance required to support successfully these educators as they draw on experience and local knowledge to create supplementary ways of understanding what goes on in literacy settings. This paper provides preliminary discussion about a research training and mentoring model of support developed in South Australia for adult literacy practitioner researchers. The preliminary data suggest that there are many tensions in teaching and learning shared across adult literacy classes and research training and mentoring programs, including the problems of the kind of support that is required for group work, when it is more useful to undertake intensive and one-to-one support, and the results of these strategies in terms of the learning aims for the program.

Researching practice and other troublesome binaries

"Practitioner inquiry", "action research", "practitioner research", "teacher-as-researcher", "research in practice", "action learning" (Drennon 2000; Lytle & Cochran-Smith 1999; Mitchell 2000; Norton & Malicky 2001): each of these terms is connected to a long history of support for the notion that educators occupy a particular relational position to (adult literacy) learners that makes it possible for them to "know" (adult literacy) learning in ways not always accessible to managers, policy makers, and researchers located in universities.[1] Moreover, these terms are located in traditions that presume teachers always operate through the filter of social relations that exist in society and, therefore, "we" are not automatically benign or neutral in our facilitating role in classrooms.

So issues of power in adult literacy classrooms are in many respects similar to other learning settings, in that they exist and are to be worked through with learners in relation to the material realities produced by and through the literacy challenges that students experience on an everyday basis. Somehow, though, educators and, in particular, literacy educators in my view have been portrayed as overly biased when it comes to interpreting outcomes in their classes because they are perceived as "too close" to the issue under investigation. In many cases, they are portrayed as having a vested interest in research outcomes given that the outcomes may be linked to their own employment prospects.

Yet, the projects described in the other papers in this collection provide examples of what happens when educators ask questions about practice, collect data from a context in which they practice, and apply a level of organised thinking to that data that allows them to be talked through in the hope of informing other practice. These projects demonstrate that it is possible to be a practitioner in the adult literacy field and to be able to look critically at the practices, context and power relations, and issues affecting employment associated with that field.

In developing the introduction to this paper, I have adopted a carefully crafted tone in the face of the pitfalls connected with describing practitioner research as a "teacher-oriented" activity as distinct from more academically oriented research carried out in universities, for such a comparison reflects many of the language traps that set up "real research" in opposition to "teacher investigations". It also reflects the assumptions that underpin other well-known binaries—theory and practice, amateur and expert knowledge, "good" practice and everyday practice and so on—which have for many years formed the basis of comparisons between teacher research and research emanating from the academy. Indeed, the use of the term "practitioner research" has the potential to consolidate these binaries by reinscribing the idea that practitioners investigate things that will be important to practitioners and have relevance in "classrooms" whilst leaving ground-breaking theoretical work to university researchers. These and many other issues were the basis of a recent gathering of people interested in what constitutes "research in practice", a term coined by Malicky and Norton (Malicky 2001, 33). The gathering itself was an influential event in helping me to develop this paper (National Adult Literacy Database forthcoming).

In a climate in which adult literacy educators collect "data" each day to run classes, to sustain programs, to report on learning, to develop and submit tenders, and to keep a large portion of the vocational education and training (VET) system afloat, I have adopted a line of investigation that tries to take account of the binaries that drive many assumptions about research and practice as well as acknowledging the material conditions under which educators do this work. My own "research" questions go something like this:

- how can educators be supported to investigate practice given the doubts raised about their objectivity?
- what kind of research training can provide a different way of viewing objectivity in a research investigation?
- what, then, does it mean to do practitioner research?
- what methods of support are required or, indeed, desired by practitioners compared to support that mentors can provide?
- how do issues like context and prior education influence practitioners' requests for support?
- what is the range of outcomes that might be achieved from practitioner research and how do these outcomes contribute to wider understandings of provision?

These questions and many more frame my preliminary evaluation of the South Australia work on practitioner research undertaken to date.

In the following pages, I outline the process for evaluating the program and the parameters of support (at least in terms of how I understood them!) for practitioner researchers who completed research projects between May 1997 and April 2001 in a research training program offered by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (South Australia) with supplementary funding at times from the Spencer Foundation (USA) and the School of Education, University of South Australia.[2] In addition, I provide a preliminary description and analysis of data collected from the researchers about their experiences of undertaking the projects and the outcomes that they believe have been achieved. The sections of this part of the analysis include:

- framing the inquiry
- researchers' responses to their learning
- wider effects of the projects.

Finally, I consider what "we" have learnt from this process.

Evaluating the program

For the purposes of evaluating the program,[3] data were collected from practitioners who had been involved in the research training and mentoring program between 1997 and 2000. Practitioner researchers were contacted and asked to participate in interview evaluations of the program. Not all participants could be interviewed or agreed to be interviewed.

From 1997–2000, 28 projects in total were sponsored and 23 practitioner researchers were involved (some practitioners were funded more than once over the period). Not all participants completed and/or documented their projects. The major reasons for non-completion were associated with reduced employment, reduced access to the intended "research site" and termination of provider funds for the "class" being investigated. In all, 16 people were able to be contacted and, of this group, 13, all women, were able to participate in an interview. Generally, the reasons for inability to participate were that we had no contact details (seven people). For those whom we could contact, however, three were unable to be involved given their other work commitments and the two-month timeframe during which the interviews were conducted.

Interviews were semistructured in nature, with participants often taking on a conversational style about their experiences. Interviews were taped and transcribed and then returned to the participants to confirm that they were an accurate representation of the discussion.

The interviewer who completed the interviews had not previously been involved in the project. Her involvement was a conscious decision on my part made in the belief that, with anonymity, the participants might speak more freely about the effectiveness of the mentoring and research training strategies that they had experienced.

Transcript examples used in this paper relate primarily to the researchers involved in the projects supported between June 2000 and April 2001. According to our commitment to confidentiality of participants in interviews, I have used pseudonyms for the voices and viewpoints reproduced herein.

Research training and mentoring: the plan and the practice

The research program

In the past few years, some South Australian adult literacy educators have been involved in a practitioner research program that has been underpinned by the assumption that they would find it useful to meet as a group and share their experiences of learning through completion of a research project geared to their practice. This assumption materialised in the form of structured workshops held generally every four to six weeks as a relatively formal learning event for practitioner researchers.

In many cases, articles were provided with the intention of offering a scaffold for thinking theoretically and practically about the projects selected for mentoring support. In 2000, for example, the focus articles concerning literacy addressed the concept of "multiliteracies", expounded by the New London Group (1995), because they included a number of elements of "theory" that the ALNARC program nationally has been promoting over the last two years: that is, literacy is a social practice, it is located in local contexts that deeply affect its shape and form, it is political and contextual, it emerges in hybrid forms as a result of the blending of different ways of using literacy (i.e., graphic, technological etc.) and, most importantly, it is about an active and agential mode of literacy use in which people are involved in "designing" and "redesigning" social futures through social literacy practices.

Focus articles concerning research methodology—ways of thinking about research—and research methods—the tools and techniques for gathering particular kinds of data—were drawn from a range of sources. Donald Freeman's *Doing teacher-research* (1998) provided a particularly valuable source of collapsed tables, diagrams, and summaries of methods and approaches, all of which gave practical advice about the "nuts and bolts" of research practice. These pieces also provided me, as a mentor, with accessible and efficient ways of "covering the content", a theme that surfaces in a number of educational contexts as an intellectual and emotional scuffle over what is included in a "curriculum", how the practical and more abstract relations of knowledge and skill are negotiated, and the timing of these negotiations.

We began some of the early workshops by talking about what literacy means in and across these settings and what practice actually looks like. We considered the common assumptions that guide programs, educator/trainer roles and responsibilities, and relationships between educators and learners, and the effects that these issues have on how the practitioner researchers were conceptualising their projects. What language and common themes underscore

practice in these settings and how do they shape the ways in which the educators could name their practice? For example, the word "literacy" was often replaced in the participants' language by "workplace communications", "life skills" or "general education" as their way of avoiding the deficit connotations that so often hook up with statements about adult literacy, which invariably originate with what people "can't do".

A model for training and mentoring

The research support for practitioners was conceived as a training and mentoring model in an attempt to deal with the range of learning needs that emerged as the practitioner researchers took on more systematic exploration of their topics. There are questions, though, about how explicitly this model was conveyed to the research participants. "Training" in this sense involved elements of induction into a research culture, an introduction to the idea that "knowledge" is a social construct and, therefore, the context and history or background to the problems are necessary elements in understanding the topic of investigation, preliminary development of ideas about questions and methods, the implications of ethical conduct in respect of how a research project is undertaken, and dissemination exercises that ensure the work is available in a domain wider than the initial setting. The principles of the model can be distilled as follows.

- Learning about teaching involves general as well as specific exploration and adaptation. Therefore, "training" in research methods, approaches and techniques is complemented by a one-to-one mentoring approach. When used together, training supported by mentoring enables the range of complex questions about research to be addressed but it also acknowledges that some simple insights—often misrepresented as "banking education"—can be enormously helpful to beginning researchers.
- Effective learning requires some commitment and, in this case, we believed that teachers need time-out from their classes, their contexts, and their collegial relationships. Practitioner research training needs to be valued enough to have its own dedicated physical space, time and focus.
- Educators' knowledge about their contexts is the starting point for the research but the model assumes that there will be common features consisting of the issues and pressures circulating in each of the contexts that will enable the practitioners to talk about and learn from shared conversations about practice across quite different learning contexts. It is the shared notion of literacy that will hold these conversations together.
- The sharing of perspectives is not, however, an assumption that the perspectives are "correct" so the model has built-in alternative ways of looking at existing teaching and learning and of considering new perspectives. Hence, at some stage, complementary readings, perspectives, and techniques will be introduced to the discussion in order to understand how familiar settings and assumptions can be unsettled in the development of supplementary ways of describing practice.

- The development of a "visible" culture to represent this work necessarily involves documenting projects and presenting to wider audiences about the insights that have been gained.

Each of these principles produced a set of concrete practices, which, while not necessarily linear, produced a sense of "order" and structure in the research training program. At the macro level, this structure included time commitment, setting parameters to the projects, defining outcomes, and delivering a report. In terms of the "training structure", the issues were more closely aligned with activities that would "get the project started", such as:

- developing and finetuning the (research) question, problem, or issue
- understanding how an issue had emerged in relation to the educator's practice and what it "looked" like in terms of the program or classroom context
- identifying literature(s) that helped to flesh out the issue, to understand it in new ways, and to revisit what seemed so familiar
- selecting methods of inquiry that shifted the investigation to the ground of "seeking alternatives" rather than "seeking solutions" and, at the same time, that ensured awareness that these small projects were exactly that—small investigations that must be viable and contained in the context of the time and resources available for the practitioner
- considering the forms of documentation available that enabled the practitioner researchers to learn from the process and, at the same time, to share that learning with others.

The structure that we encouraged and helped to create is no different in many ways from that of any other educator who offers a module to learners over a set period of time and has to juggle the constraints of time, content, diverse knowledge, and skill bases with which any educator has to deal. Like any educator, I made judgments about the delivery of the program that were designed to make the most of the time and resources available. Consequently, the program operated "within and against" the sense of closure that underpins organised learning and provides the basis for what is included and excluded at one and the same time (cf. Lather 1991). Training and mentoring adult literacy educators who adopt a practitioner researcher role seems necessarily to involve working with this tension associated with the point at which closure is called, who calls it, and the effects. This is no different from other educators who have to make judgment calls. Nevertheless, closure from my point of view as the "educator" was not always a guarantee of closure for the practitioner researchers as learners during this project.

Educators' experiences of the research process

Framing the inquiry

Practitioner researchers often framed their response to the overall project in terms of their having "no idea what they were getting into when they started". This view was a recurring feature of their responses and was repeated through their data collection and into the "writing up" phase, which extended for several months for most researchers.

My own approach to research did not always assist the process. I wanted the practitioners to experience what it was like to find their own topic, to produce a piece of work that was meaningful to them, that resonated with their own hunches about how adult literacy provision actually plays itself out in learning contexts. This principle of uncertainty was built into the structure and delivery of the program by consciously talking about the tension between scientific models of research, with which many of us are familiar, and approaches based on gut feeling, hunches and experience. But as Terri Seddon says:

> *Gut feelings are not enough of themselves to inform reflection ... Theorists are those individuals who try to make sense of the world by reflecting on experience ... Good practice which is informed by research will make explicit how and why data was obtained, how sense was made of it, and how this can best be translated into action.*
>
> (Adult Community and Further Education Board 1997, 17)

Needless to say, this open approach to "walking around" in the topic provoked various responses from the practitioner researchers. "Pam" explained her impressions:

> *I can't tell you what the strategy was, but that sense of questioning what [we] were doing, what I'm doing as a researcher writing up what "they" say, definitely that [agenda] was running, that stepping outside, stepping back approach was something I was very conscious of.*

A number of core readings helped to provide a framework or "body of knowledge" against which the contextualised practice of the project could be discussed. The aim was not to replace teacher's knowledge with a body of detached theory; rather, the intention was to encourage the practitioner researchers to produce supplementary ways of thinking about the topic under investigation. This systematic inquiry was attractive to one researcher who said in the interview: "when the opportunity came up to actually look into it in a really structured way, it appealed to me a lot".

But the structured workshops also enabled practitioner researchers to meet with, and talk to, other educators. In fact, one participant clearly thought that this aspect was the most valuable part of the structure provided: "I think the talking and meeting other women, a couple of them in particular, was the most useful thing, rather than the formal program".

In this respect, the program, which combines mentoring and a structured "research training" component, seemed to offer something missing in the professional lives of the women involved. "Mary" reminded us of the industrial conditions under which many of the women work and the effects that these conditions have on the capacity to participate in collective conversations about teachers' work:

> *People are working so much harder, there's not much time for them to network with other practitioners unless they actually make the effort themselves to get to things ... it often gets left off. So I think it plays a very important role as far as literacy practitioners are concerned, especially.*

In this context of limited time and pressing need for professional development, "meeting practitioner researcher needs" was a recurrent theme, with some people wanting more direct one-to-one support and others finding that broader networking and "research conversation" were adequate to keep them moving along.

The choice to provide a structured workshop program combined with individual mentoring "made sense" in that it reflected internal tensions that many educators experience. It provided a framework for offering group and individual support when both the research staff and the practitioners were stretched for time, feeling pressed to "cover the content", and struggling to meet the diverse learning "needs" represented amongst the participants. Yet educators in other contexts experience these tensions and they know that simple adoption of a structured program of support is not of itself a solution to messy learning demands.

Other than a general acceptance that the structure was at times useful, there were very few common agreements about how the structure worked for the participants as individuals. For example, Mary indicated that she wanted more structure:

> *[In the] workshops, [I wanted] ... more focus on practicalities, and less individual reporting. More of a top down—more input from the people who are very familiar with how to go about it—would be useful I think.*

On the other hand, "Karen" showed that she learnt from the wider discussions:

> *Probably what I gained most from was the opportunity to be involved in the group sessions with Sue and the other researchers and talk about what they were doing, and seeing some of the possibilities for researching. Maybe that was more about the practice, just the things they were doing helped me see that "Oh, that could be considered".*

Pam pointed out in the sessions, however, that my "structure" was not necessarily working in the way that I had envisaged, and nor should it. Each project was individual: what they had in common was the sense of exploration and questioning, as well as the theme of literacy as social practice in diverse contexts. But Pam felt caught between this plan and her practice:

> *the difficulty for me was that I didn't [collect data] until all those meetings were finished. The other people were having those meetings while they had research underway, while they were doing write-ups and collecting data. I*

> *didn't even collect data until the end of the third workshop so the three that I went to at the uni were like academic exercises for me.*

For many of the researchers, this tension between individual guidance and more free-ranging discussion continued to be a problem. Meredith said:

> *I think [one-to-one] would've been good if it had've been possible, and [Sue and Ruth] did set up one-to-one, but it would have been good if we'd had more one-to-one. Sometimes I couldn't see the point of everybody being together ... with us all doing such disparate things. I can understand from a point of view of funding and practicality and how difficult it was, that everybody had to be together, but . . . if they're going to be in a group together . . . they need to think about what they can gain from a common stand ... even if we'd had an hour when we're all together where we talked about general things which was useful, then it might be possible to have maybe a half-hour appointment with each [practitioner researcher]. I don't know.*

On the one hand, Karen said: "we felt very supported, it was very non-judgmental, it was just a different atmosphere. I don't think as far as I'm concerned that I ever felt I couldn't do what had to be done". But a climate of support for Karen was translated into a more uneasy level of experience for Mary, who also noted that she "felt very vulnerable" especially when it came to comments on her written report, which, in her mind, seemed to be largely a process of pointing out the problems, rather than the more supportive and positive process for which she had hoped.

In this program, the practitioner researchers and I had an idealised vision of a structure that would meet "our" needs and we looked to this structure to alleviate some of the tensions. I wanted more time to spend with the researchers, while some of them wanted a qualitatively different kind of interaction at times that was not forthcoming. So "more time" did not always provide the means by which we could negotiate the what, when and how of learning to do projects that were at times very unruly. Some would say that these projects provided an ideal "learning by doing" moment for the practitioners but, clearly, there were problems that were not easy to resolve and increased time was not always the answer.

Researchers' responses to the learning

Until now, we have had few clear examples in this program of how involvement in the structured training and mentoring program has had an impact on professional practice, because most of the work of the program had been geared towards disseminating information about the literacy projects. Practitioners, in their evaluation of the past three or four years of activities, however, have made some clear statements about the effects of the research training and mentoring on their stances as educators. One of the more common responses involved "thinking differently" about practice, a degree of curiosity that may not have

been promoted in the increasing climate of outcomes-driven funding programs and curriculum development, which have accompanied change in VET over the last decade. The shift in thinking was described by Karen as follows:

> *there's still lots more things that I'm curious about ... because there hasn't been enough put down on paper about what's actually happening. Just going through a process of finding out about those things and putting it down allows everyone to talk about it, to say "This is what we should be doing". "Is this what we really thought we were doing?" I think it's professional development for all of us.*

And there was also a sense of personal change that accompanied the professional dimensions that Pam experienced in doing the project:

> *I [gained] a much better understanding of what research is about, a better understanding of the process. I learnt a lot about myself, and of course a lot more about my program. I feel a lot more confident about teaching in the field that I'm in ... I feel a lot more confident myself teaching in the program because I now know an awful lot about it. Of course it's affected my teaching practice and I'm able to promote the program very well now... Yes it's had a very positive affect on my professional development.*

Moreover, Pam reminded us that she was on a "steep learning curve" in the project and that it helped her to reconnect with the challenges that her students were facing:

> *I was preparing for presentations when they were preparing for presentations. And when I talked to them and saw their emotional ups and downs about writing an essay, I shared with them about how I felt about writing this research report. It gave us a great point of connection.*

There were reflections from the practitioner researchers about "next time", although it is fair to say that few of them have been keen to take up another project in the near future. I expand on some of these reasons later in this paper. Pam described it like this:

> *if I was doing a research project again I would be much more relaxed about the timing, and know not to panic if the answers aren't coming. It's OK to just sit with the data and keep looking at [them] because more and more stuff comes up and different connections happen and you see things differently. I started to write [a report] about a quarter of the way through the process, which kept bubbling along as I went through the writing. So if I was doing a research project again I would be more relaxed about sitting and thinking, and more confident about putting the time in there [in thinking] to make the writing much easier. I ended up doing both processes at the same time which meant that it just blew out time-wise, and length-wise, and how much work I did would have been reduced. If I'd been disciplined to have the confidence to think—"stay thinking, stay thinking," and not start writing so soon.*

In many respects, this ambivalence was a key theme in the workshops—for practitioners to stay wide but to zero in at some stage once they had an appreciation of their topics. This approach was not a reprimand to forget the voice of experience; rather, it was a caution first to learn how to render the familiar strange, to learn to see the events of the "research problem" through supplementary lenses and, second, to resist developing solutions to a problem that had not yet been adequately opened up to complexity:

> *You don't need ... necessarily to find the answers, but you just have to ask the questions. I think maybe that's what I learned. [Sue] was always saying, "What's the question"... rather than, "what are you going to do?" ..."What's the question?"*

But I have noted a number of times that this focus sits in tension with some of the practicalities of "producing" research. Mary understood this clearly as she indicated in the following comment:

> *if we were studying and doing this as just the one thing in our existence and focusing on it, we would be working in depth and we'd be immersed in that kind of academic thinking style. But as an activity with many other activities going on around us, just getting into that academic mindset was very difficult. [Some of us] have studied and been successful, but we found [this an] enormous drain.*

So it was hard to predict how my "plans" would work themselves out in the long run. Meredith seemed to appreciate the advantages of a more fluid approach to what I have described as "walking around in the topic" but she also recognised the benefits of advice designed to bring the project to closure:

> *I'm more reflective ... I'm more analytical ... I've now learned to focus on say two (outcomes) ... I'm trying to have a less laissez-faire approach in that if I'm handing out a chapter on something ... I don't try and cover every aspect in the chapter. I give it to [the class] and hone in on one aspect of that chapter. So I'm applying much more of a university approach to it, so that they've got the freedom to go and try things and come back and ask questions.*

These are interesting reflections in that they identify "academic" and "university approaches", which seem to have influenced how practitioners went about their work. But again, there is no agreement about how this has worked. The "no single answer" approach to research inquiry seems to have been helpful for Meredith; but applying a "university approach" also goes to the heart of the very difficulties that the practitioners have had in naming how their language and knowledge are placed under suspicion and their authority to speak about "practice" is marginalised by the academy. Academic language provides the marker of difference between the research and practice genres of documenting even as it also provides the basis for a "university approach" that has guided Meredith's change in practice.

This ambivalence was particularly evident when it came to finding ways to report on the projects and the extent to which some identified their uneasiness with the concept of the knowledgeable expert. A written report was required and the researchers were encouraged—indeed, strongly encouraged—to present at conferences about their work. Meredith talked about how she used the focus of presenting about her research to "manage her time" and to help her complete the project:

> *I just kept going. One thing that really helped me was that in the middle of the program I did some talks ... that was the first time I actually set down some thoughts on paper and that really helped me. That helped me a hell of a lot. That built the raft. I just kept going [from there].*

But, once again, what I enthusiastically saw as the opportunities provided by the structure of this program were perceived differently by Pam, who expressed another view on how she could meet these expectations of "research" performance outcomes:

> *In the last workshop [Sue] laid out a timeframe about what would happen about publication dates and what could be expected about writing papers and giving presentations and so on ... where things would be published and other areas to publish and fliers to promote your paper and so on ... I was just gobsmacked, and I wasn't the only one. I went wooooaaa I had no idea I was getting into this sort of thing, and I felt quite intimidated, alarmed really. I thought, hang on I just agreed to do a small research project.*
>
> *... if I'd known [this] when I went into it, I wouldn't have gone into it. I just would have been frightened off, full stop. It's not my scene. It's not just about giving presentations it's about ... [Pam is thinking] ... being an expert, I guess, and some of that stuff about me, yeah, it's about being an expert, and I did not feel [like] an expert ... not in terms of my classroom teaching practice, but in terms of academic speak. That's where I really felt vulnerable. I just didn't have the academic speak about the subject, didn't have my head around all the latest ideas and ... didn't feel confident in it. I just don't like talking, I don't like writing or giving presentations about something where people think "Who's this?".*

The reflections that these educators have provided and the tensions that they have identified echo many of the tensions that I have also experienced as a manager and educator who planned the program in the context of the usual concerns of managing learning, ensuring something useful was learned, achieving completion of the task (the projects), and securing a report for wider dissemination to the field (and an alternative example of evidence of learning). But Pam has also revealed in these last words the struggle that takes place around the binaries of expert and amateur knowledge, professional and lay understandings, and rational and messy everyday practices. Her concerns are located in a very material struggle, as anyone who has presented at a conference or written a paper for public dissemination can attest. The term "expert"

reinscribes the very inequalities that practitioner research is trying to disassemble in its attempt to disrupt the binary of academic and practical knowledge by moving to a different kind of ground on which understandings about practice are based. So how do researchers and practitioners keep an eye on how we are working the binaries as part of our own awareness of constituting research in practice as Norton and Malicky (2001) propose?

Many issues remain to be explored in terms of adequately supporting educators professionally, intellectually, emotionally and financially to undertake these projects. In many educational institutions managers are under pressure to account for teacher's work in terms of student contact hours. Many of the educators working in these projects are self-employed or are casual hourly paid and short-term contract staff with no security of tenure. In the case of the projects sponsored during 2000, for example, each had substantial moral and professional support from their institutions (this was something we established in early correspondence with the researchers, their work teams, and their managers). Nevertheless, each of the projects drew on the time and resources of the practitioner researchers by asking them to step outside the taken-for-granted ways that many practitioners have of doing and disseminating research. By our adopting this orientation, the researchers were being asked to perform in ways that went against the grain of conventional ways of thinking about research and practice and required forms of support that outstripped the resources available within the program.

Wider effects of the projects

Like many professional development activities, the research training and mentoring program aimed for a wider audience than the teachers and learners directly connected with the program. In addition, an underpinning theme of many literacy programs—to "make a difference"—was also a central theme in the research training and mentoring program. Some "differences" were reflected in the ways in which students might learn literacy, others in the ways in which literacy was understood by managers and funding agencies, and still others in the ways in which agencies might explore new ways of working together. Some projects aimed to provide advice to a program management unit and to have effects on professional development and curriculum (cf. Peterson, Gunn, and Martin in this volume); others dealt with issues of pedagogy that have had unintended but productive effects on the ways in which programs are organised and accredited (cf. Campbell in this volume).

For funding agencies that support such work, a central question concerns the impact that the practitioner research processes have on "outcomes". It seemed obvious then that we would explore this dimension briefly in reflections on the program. For example, three projects in 2000 focused on women and literacy, and one (Gunn in this volume) specifically explored the issue of women and domestic violence. The aim was not to produce answers about the connections between literacy and domestic violence: rather, the project aimed to understand how service providers recognise and support the educational and

literacy needs of women moving on from domestic violence. From this stance, the outcomes have combined networking, producing new knowledge about the relationships between literacy and domestic violence, and providing the ground for future action as Gunn's reflections on this project showed:

> *A couple of people I've spoken with about it have had this light bulb going on, saying, "yes that really makes a lot of sense—putting domestic violence and literacy together," and that there isn't a specific recognition of that in [the programs] they offer and it would add a great deal to see those two things coming together.*

In cases where groups of educators worked with the sponsored researcher, these educators began to ask how the findings were applicable outside of their own programs. For example, the project conducted with TAFE SA's Women's Education Program considered the questions of what the connection is between feminist and literacy pedagogical objectives and what can be learnt from Women's Education and literacy educators' working more closely together. In short, these participants in a practitioner research program, and the practitioner researcher herself, saw possibilities for extending the exploration begun in the research project into the broader domain of their work practices and contexts. So the program's aim to promote the findings of the research projects more widely seems to have borne fruit: the program encouraged these practitioner researchers to disseminate their work and, thus, the projects have had wider effects than the professional development of the practitioner researchers alone.

It must be said, however, that whilst the researchers were hoping for some change in practice as a result of their involvement in the projects, there was also a certain reticence in their thinking that these projects would produce ground-breaking effects. This reticence may reflect, I suspect, the continued effects of the old binary that valourises certain research that emerges from the academy to the detriment of that produced by practitioners.

Yet, at the same time as there was this reticence, there was a recognition by some practitioner researchers that the project "findings" should not produce structured curriculum products that would simply be "transplanted" uncritically—commodified and commercialised—into other settings. As one practitioner researcher noted:

> *we're becoming corporatised ... I like to think you can be creative and commercial [in this climate] ... I'm not quite sure ... [you] can't actually think this will "just" happen.*

She has recognised that some of the work developed in these projects is, as she puts it, "dependent upon time and trust", and these are not easy things to produce in classrooms. These concerns raised questions for me about the kinds of wider effects from the projects that are appropriate and the ways in which the field may pick up on the findings of the projects.

Other comments made in the interviews reflected the importance of professional development through research as a more systematic development of the educators as professionals who are involved in a wide range of teaching,

advocacy, program management, and dissemination activities. Pam, for instance, explained the possibilities for wider dissemination:

> *I've been encouraged to disseminate the paper quite broadly in Adelaide by people who've read it, starting with the participants who were very excited with the paper. One of the participants encouraged me to contact the CEO of her agency and that's been very productive, and she's asked if she can pass it on to a number of agencies.*

What have "we" learnt from this?

This research training and mentoring program has provided practitioners with much needed financial resources and the "thinking time" that is so rare in education settings these days. Moreover, it gave added richness to this thinking time for most of the practitioner researchers by enabling them to come together with other educators who were also keen to ask questions and explore practice in settings quite different from their own. Each of the four projects reported in this collection offers insights into pedagogy and policy associated with adult literacy provision. They also give organisations and groups of educators a rare opportunity to look into the practice of other classes and groups and to explore the commonalties and differences across these various contexts.

Much of my discussion focuses on the process of learning research but these projects were also about producing a particular kind of knowledge about practice. My impression from what the practitioner researchers have indicated on a number of occasions is that they believe that their locations in classrooms and with service providers give an "insider" feel to the projects that cannot be achieved by academic "outsiders" (see also Norton & Malicky 2001). This issue of location in research is a major issue for university-based researchers who want to work with educators located in adult literacy programs. But the distinction should not be read as agreement that there is a "real" world linked to insider practitioners and an "unreal" world of the academy just as the research work of practitioners should not be discounted in favour of "real" research done by academics. Rather, I am acknowledging that context makes a difference to understanding practice and that there are material differences in and across the contexts, which are described in the projects in this program (such as those included in this volume) and which go beyond the simple binary of academic and "real" world research.

Exploration of our contexts of "academic" and "practical" location was not going to shift the long-term effects of language that reproduces the academic/professional binary and consolidates another binary relationship between valuable and marginalised knowledges of classrooms and "the" academy. Further, disparities between these contextual locations for research were exacerbated by the inequalities that some of the educators experienced within their work locations, inequalities that worked at times to entrench rather than unsettle these troublesome binaries. "Meredith" demonstrated this clearly in her description of the challenges faced by educators who work in an increasingly deregulated and casualised industry:

> *[the research] helped me take myself a bit more seriously because I think when you're a [part-time instructor] it's very easy not to be taken seriously isn't it? You're in and you're out, and there's this myth that [we] just come and do nothing. [We] teach and then [we] go, and of course that's not the case at all if you're committed.*

She has raised a very important issue for funding agencies and providers to consider if the knowledges produced by these projects are to have any impact on professional development of adult literacy educators in VET given the increasingly casualised modes of employment (cf. Harris et al 2000; Chappell 1999). Her words do not suggest that there is a single answer or that practitioner knowledge should hold a singular dominant position in a reversed binary. Rather, she has pointed to the layers of meaning that need to be negotiated before practitioner research projects will have "impact" beyond the circle of participants involved in the projects:

> *it's always been done off the smell of an oily rag. I think what people need to recognise—perhaps, it would be great to have more money ... there are very very few people now who are in permanent or even long-term contracts. Therefore you're running around like a blue-tailed fly trying to fit things all over the place and with no time—no time. And we all know, we all spend more time [than is paid] on it. I'm not worried about that, but maybe people who finance research are still under the mistaken impression that there are tenured people.*

In this response, time and money are recurring themes that I would not dispute. But the research program that we undertook was also about "thinking differently", responding to "curiosity", and working with these tensions as an accepted part of any educational work that goes beyond rote learning. Examples of what it looks like to work with this tension will be sorely needed if people like the practitioners and me are to produce accounts of research experience that move beyond our work location and address the political, intellectual, and emotional locations that also drive the inquiries we undertake.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have worked through some aspects of the kind of program for research training and mentoring that we have used with adult literacy practitioner researchers over the past few years as part of a preliminary evaluation of the program. As this paper shows, the model that we have developed was intended to provide a theoretical and practical framework for practitioner researchers to think through their topics and issues that emerged from their research. My concerns in this paper have been to question some of the assumptions in the program about what it means to do practitioner research and how we have supported that research.

The data from interviews with the practitioner researchers indicate that my plan and practice for research training and mentoring had dimensions that I

did not foresee. There have been some valuable outcomes for the practitioner researchers and their research projects, such as time-out from workplaces and colleagues to think through a range of issues of interest, the opportunity for practitioner researchers to come together to discuss their process and data, guidance in developing a research ethos that encourages practitioner researchers to try to stand critically as well as sympathetically in respect of researching the field, and professional development opportunities. The data from the interviews that we conducted show also that there have been some confusions, mixed expectations (some satisfied, some not), and a degree of anxiety at times articulated by the practitioner researchers about the process of doing research. These outcomes are at odds with my intentions as a research mentor. The interviews have revealed some unexpected benefits for practitioner researchers as well as some concerns on their part about the potential commodification and oversimplification of project findings. The time for contemplation of issues and to develop a relationship with their research participants as well as the financial support that the projects afforded cannot be as easily reproduced in their workplaces.

I have suggested that the troublesome binary of academic/professional persists in underpinning some responses to the projects as well as the program. While the data show that the practitioner researchers have had some ambivalence to the research process—for instance, in terms of the wider impact of their projects—which could be attributed to this binary, tensions in their workplaces have also been revealed as reproducing this kind of privileging of academic research at the expense of that done by practitioner researchers, particularly in respect of how the findings of the research projects may be taken up. But this preliminary evaluation has also shown up the persistence of my own reinscription of this troublesome binary—for example, in terms of the kind of language that I have used at times to describe this set of researchers as "novice". What the evaluation demonstrates is that there is further work to be done to unsettle the binarised configuration of adult literacy research in order for the richness of the practitioner research projects to be understood and valued.

Notes

1. In early support for projects, I used to call the work "mentoring novice researchers" but a colleague, Jenny McGuirk, rightly pointed to the way in which this term deleted the basis of expertise on which the practitioner researchers were involved in the first place—their practitioner status. "Practitioner researcher" seems like a mouthful but is the term that I use for now to work through the ideas in this paper.
2. A number of other projects were supported during this period but, for reasons of editorial coherence, they are not included in this collection. Other projects included Reid (2001), Wood (2001), Campbell (2001) and Lake et al (2001).

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3. In the 2000–2001 program, Ruth Trenerry and I worked as research mentors. We have discussed many aspects of the program, discussion that has assisted me in writing this preliminary evaluation. The paper reflects my particular approach, however, and should not be assumed to articulate Ruth's perspective on the program.

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